PARENTAL ADVISORY

border line

#13 August 2002

The Comics Magazine

In this issue:

From Sex to X-Men - the fall and rise of Chuck Austen

Plus other interviews with:

Chris Staros
Eddie Campbell
Michael Marts
Przemyslaw Truscinski
Brett Booth

Articles on:

Herriman's Krazy & Ignatz
Grist & Elliott's Absent Friends
Northern Lightz
The Czech Komiks scene
Max Allan Collins' on the Road to Perdition
Kevin Lau's Xin

Features about:

Dick Ayers
Robert Adler
Steve Griffin
Caption 2002

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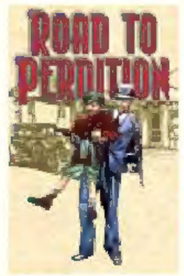

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This month's people bathed in starlight include: Graham Dickens & John Parkinson for troubleshooting the e-commerce, Chuck Austen for helping turn the big interview round in 24 hours – plus Chris Staros, Henry Cobbold, Gary Ochiltree and others who have committed to advertising, and Tomas, Dennis, Witold and the rest of our new chums in Eastern Europe.

New cover design by the extravagantly dressed Jim Campbell, X-Men cover art by Kaare Andrews – X-quisite!

Next month: maybe...

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IN THE LINE OF FIRE

Phil Hall's occasional editorial styled column makes a short reappearance...

WE'RE a huge success! No, really, we are. We've had as many as 152,000 people download a single issue of this magazine!

And I'll bet you didn't think there were 152,000 comics fans? Actually there's probably 152,000 comics fans in Norway.

So, we're not really that much of a success then, are we?

You show me another comics magazine that sells 152,000 copies (any more).

OK, we don't "sell" Borderline, but just as much, if not more, care and attention goes into producing one issue of this magazine as goes into the production of many magazines, full stop. Arguably it takes more effort to download an issue of Borderline than it does to walk into your favourite comics store and pick up one of the limited choice of comics magazines.

A lot of the attention we've received over the last couple of months has probably been as a direct result of the *Save Borderline Appeal* the one that annoyed a small, insignificant percentage of the US comics fraternity. But the largest rise in readers has come from the rest of the world! We're becoming more global. The world is at last catching up with us and as you'll see by the increasing amount of European creators we've been showcasing, they're almost taking over.

And guess what? I've not heard one dissenting voice, not one complaint about too much eclecticism (apart from David Bishop who felt that giving Brazil a well deserved pat on the back for having a successful comics industry was bordering on obsession!). In fact, downloads on certain issues are phenomenally high and getting higher all the time.

My mate, American Century artist Marc Laming, wondered what the month's figures were on last issue. His reaction was "Blimey Charlie!" when he heard that it was 15 people shy of 70,000 downloads! That's getting on for 6 times more people reading *about* American Century than actually *read* American Century!

In fact, remember all my whinging and moaning about getting no support from Marvel and DC? I passed on a stack of comps to lots of our contributors recently from Adam at DC and Bill at Marvel has just sent us a package full of goodies that will be reviewed next issue. It appears that we needed to be around for 12 months before anyone (who thinks they're anyone) would take us seriously.

Anyhow, this is an update more than an editorial, because we like you to know the score. We have no secrets from our readers.

For starters we're carrying a "Parental Advisory" notice on the cover! We figured we ought to run it on account of the amounts of nudity present in this issue and amazingly Kevin Schomburg had nothing to do with it. I interviewed Chuck Austen and frankly I figured you'd rather see his nudey shots than those dreadful Miracleman pics!

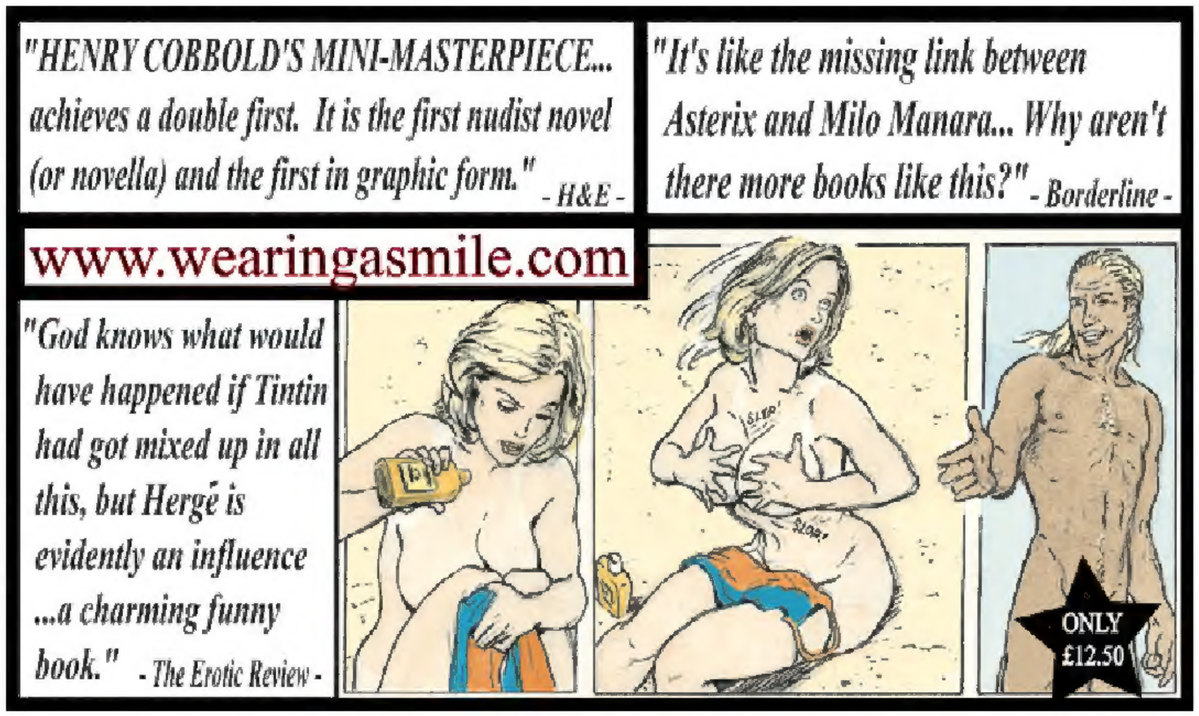
There's also a far more adult theme about some of our spotlighted creators and some of our writers are using four-letter expletives with more gay abandon than a Sydney carnival!

We've also made a few changes to the website, including the decision to charge anyone now for back issues. Issue #3 has, as I said at the start of this ramble, been downloaded by 152,000 + small change. Over 110,000 of those downloads have been in the last six months and from countries where Brazilian comics have far more significance than a Jm Lee Batman or a Masamune Shirow Dominion. As more and more people are made aware of us, we felt it was time to actually make latecomers pay for our previous hard work and so we're now going to charge you $1.00 to download all the back issues, apart from The Manhattan Projects, which would be a touch crass.

We've had a few people come back and advertise with us. Henry Cobbold's original Wearing a Smile advert must have worked somewhat, because he was more than happy to book more ad space, while Chris Staros and Brett Warnock took out another couple of ads with us, not because we interviewed Chris this month, but because they saw an increase in hits on the Top Shelf site from Borderline. I'd love to be able to say to comics sellers that we're your best bet for selling your wares, but it really does appear to be publishers who benefit the most.

And that's about it for another month it's been hard holding down a couple of jobs and doing this, but it's been worthwhile and as a result you're getting something traditionally British...

A bumper summer special edition!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"God knows what would have happened if Tintin had got mixed up in all this, but Hergé is evidently an influence ...a charming funny book." - The Erotic Review -
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THE CHUCK WAGON

"WHERE THE HELL DOES HE GET OFF?"
THE CHUCK AUSTEN INTERVIEW

THERE can be very few creators in American comicbooks who have followed a more controversial career trajectory than that of writer/artist Chuck Austen. As a complete newcomer he landed the assignment everyone wanted back in 1986, that of artist on the new material for Alan Moore's Miracleman. Fan reaction was less than positive. Within a few issues he was off the book, moving on to do a few assignments for DC and other companies before launching an allegedly semi-autobiographical porn series, Strips, with legendary underground publisher Rip Off Press. At the beginning of the 1990s he dropped off the comics industry's radar completely.

A couple of years ago he stormed back into view with an unusual project - US War Machine, an entirely self-created weekly series for Marvel. Fan reaction was less than positive! Yet Marvel, ignoring readers' reactions, proceeded to place him on high profile projects such as the revived Elektra and their new series about the New York emergency services, The Call, and have now hired him for another of the industry's plum assignments, writing Uncanny X-Men. Fan reaction remains less than positive…

Lucky guy, or unrecognised talent? Borderline's Phil Hall spoke with this man who the fans love to hate about his career, and found a very confident gentleman who appears to know precisely what he's doing and what he wants.

Borderline: Chuck, why don't you tell us a bit about yourself and give the readers an idea of where you've been and what you've done in comics?
Chuck Austen: Wow. That question could take a while to answer.

I started off in comics right after college some years ago. I did a few things for Eclipse, then got lucky and landed the Miracleman gig. Then I got fed up with Cat Yronwode and left Miracleman and Eclipse and went off to do some independent work with Slave Labor Graphics.

Dan Vado and I came up with the

idea for a team book called Hero Sandwich, and for a variety of reasons I eventually moved on from there.

BL: I remember Dan Vado. Did you work with him around the time he did The Griffin? That's a book I'd like to try and get Borderline readers to look at. The miniseries he took to DC was one of the best things of the early '90s.
CA: I worked with Dan just before that time. Norman Felchle, the artist on that, had been my assistant on Strips, and graduated very quickly into not needing me anymore. He's a tremendous talent and he's now doing freelance work outside of comics that's just stunning. The Griffin was a very cool book that Dan was really excited about, and I thought he did an amazing job with, but that was all after I had left Slave Labor.

I then did a few things at DC - *Phantom Lady*, some Legion stuff - and then I got fed up with mainstream, and comics in general, and left the industry for computer games.

I worked in games for about fifteen years before leaving there and moving into animation. Then animation dried up and I went back to comics.

BL: What kind of games and animation did you work on? Anything that the readers would be familiar with?
CA: *The Simpsons* and *King of the Hill* for FOX and a company called Film Roman. Very little *Simpsons*, and too much *King of the Hill*.

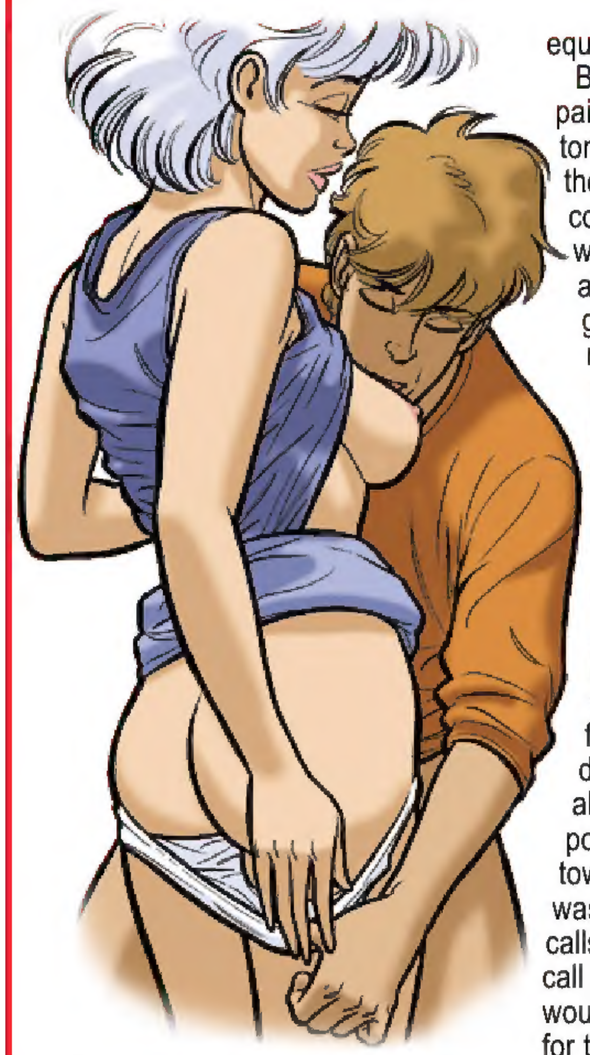
BL: How did you get the Miracleman gig? There have been various stories, but I'd like to hear it from the guy himself.
CA: Pure luck. I submitted samples along with every other available freelancer, and Alan liked my work because it wasn't "mainstream". I had a style more like the Hernandez Brothers, we have a lot of the same influences I guess, and that got me the job. It was really Alan's decision. I know Cat wasn't thrilled with the idea of using me. I was too unknown and they were hoping to get Totleben or Bissette, or Alan Davis back. Someone with some "name" cachet in the industry at that point. Eventually, when I left, they did.

BL: Did you get any bizarre requests in your scripts for MM?
CA: I never considered them bizarre. Alan was overly detailed, definitely, but it was good.

BL: Garry Leach once asked the editor of Warrior, "what the fuck are 'dust motes' and how do you draw them?" when Alan requested specific details.
CA: Yeah, he would throw in a lot of stuff like that. But it was more intended to convey a mood to the artist, not to be slavishly followed. Dust motes. That's a good one. Alan has actually influenced my writing in that regard. I include things that can't be drawn to give the artist a deeper understanding of mood and atmosphere.

BL: About Cat Yronwode's aversion to you working on Miracleman - was there any specific reason for it, especially considering that Alan's deal was to have an editor who basically just traffic managed?
CA: That's interesting. Cat always used to say that Miracleman was hers and Dean's and if Alan didn't get on the stick and start turning in scripts, they would find a replacement. I would just laugh. Replace Alan? With whom? Eclipse was this company supposedly founded on treating creators well, better than they'd been treated in the mainstream, and she was constantly talking about yanking stuff from the creators. They

Austen camps it up as his own creation!



had no better understanding than either Marvel or DC at the time of what made a book work.

Cat's problem with me seemed to be solely based on my not being a "hot" artist, at least those were the reasons she gave me to my face. I have no idea if there was more to it. I was an unknown and she was expecting MM to break her and Eclipse out of the ghetto of being a third tier company, at long last. They had high expectations for their earlier big projects, like DNAgents and Aztec Ace, and they hadn't really taken them to the stratosphere as Eclipse had hoped. Alan was huge and they wanted an artist equally as huge.

But the worst part was they never paid on time, and they gave you tons of grief about it. Cat said in the Miracleman book that I was constantly late and unreliable, which is bullshit. All you ever hear about are the stories of artists not getting their work in on time, missing deadlines, and they never mention that those artists had to find other work to pay the bills, and put Eclipse on the back burner because Eclipse paid so late.

I wasn't one of them, unfortunately. I was really new and had no other options besides McDonalds at the time, so I got my work in on time, on false deadlines, actually, earlier deadlines than were needed, although Cat would argue that point. I stopped delivering art toward the end because Eclipse wasn't paying or returning phone calls. It became a cycle. Cat would call and yell for more pages, and I would say, "Hey, I haven't been paid for that Twisted Tales story yet", and suddenly her tone would change and become gracious and conciliatory. "Oh, are you sure? You should have gotten that check by now." And then she would hang up and I wouldn't hear from them for another week or two.

By the end, I'd had enough and did go to work at McDonalds for a while. Can you imagine, leaving Miracleman for McDonalds? But I was young and volatile.

BL: What was working with Alan Moore like, especially at a time in his career when he was making a name for himself in more ways than one?
CA: Awesome. He was very encouraging and supportive and very complimentary of my work. The only thing I regret about quitting was Alan had asked me in a phone conversation not to quit until I talked to him first, and I didn't.

BL: Do you think it would have changed things had you phoned Alan and told him what you were planning? Put yourself into an alternate scenario here - where could you have been if you'd stayed on as MM artist and Totleben had never got a look in?
CA: I've wondered, but I'm not really the kind of person who looks back on missed opportunities. There are lots of forks in the road in life, and I chose the ones I chose for a reason. I think I would have ended up in the same place. Totleben would have shown interest and Eclipse would have dumped me anyway.

I honestly don't know what might have happened. I enjoyed the self-publishing route a lot with Slave Labor, which came up soon after I left Eclipse, and I would have missed that. But ultimately, I think I would have wound up in the same place I am now.

I was really excited about Alan's plans. I *really* wanted to draw the birth issue, and I would like to have had the opportunity to realize some of Alan's other plans, but ...

Cat was so bothered by the birth story. Alan had apparently been there to witness the birth of his daughter and wanted to convey that sense of wonder and beauty in the medium he loved, in all its graphic detail. I thought, "man, what a challenge," and you know I have no problem with being graphic.

But Cat hated the idea and wanted Alan to tone it down.

Alan knew I was having problems with Eclipse, not getting paid, not getting originals back, not getting much support from Cat. He called one day and I bitched about the situation and he said "Promise me you won't quit without talking to me first." I said I wouldn't and then a few days later, I quit without a word to Alan. That always bothered me, and then in [the Miracleman Companion] you get the impression he barely remembers me, so I've been beating myself up over nothing for years *(laughs)*.

BL: I live about a half a mile from the guy and see him in the pub now and again. I'll ask him if you want.
CA: If the situation arises, sure. I leave that up to you. Mostly I think Alan and I both must be pleased with where we are in life, so I think we'd both consider that in the past. Comics can be too much about looking back. We need to look forward more.

BL: Why the name change?
CA: I got married. Seriously. I never liked my original name, and my fiancée and I were talking about whether she would take my name or keep hers. I suggested picking a new name for our new life together, and that's what we did. Jane Austen was her favorite author, and I liked the name, so we picked that one. Now we're long since divorced, and I still have the name and a new wife who shares it.

BL: Care to tell us about Strips?
CA: Sure. What do you want to know?

BL: How did it come about?
CA: Dan Vado and Scott Saavedra and I had been discussing a "reality" series for Slave Labor. I can't remember the name of the title now, but it was intended to be an anthology series of more or less realistic stories, as opposed to fantasy-based, or superheroes. More like Love and Rockets.

I came up with a ten-page story

about college life. It was centered around my experiences living in the dorms at college, and dealt with some very sexual themes, although it wasn't graphic in any way at that time. It was intended to be a romance story, because I'm a romantic and I always wanted to do a romantic comedy comic. Still do. And a baseball comic.

When I finished the layouts, I showed them to Dan, and apparently he and Scott decided it was too sexual. They didn't have any interest in publishing the kind of material I was implying in my story. Dan wasn't asking me to change it, but he was really uncomfortable with the material I had presented him with. There was nothing graphic in it, no language or anything, but the implications were strong, strong enough to create tension with Dan and Scott.

BL: I find this remarkable, considering that people like Vado were at the cutting edge of indie publishing back then, when more and more adult themes were being dealt with.

CA: Dan had concerns at the time. He owned a store as well as ran the publishing venture, and he saw both sides. He knew adult material sold, but he also knew distributors were really, really edgy about adult material at the time, and stores were getting closed down. We're talking about the beginnings of things like [Chaykin's] Black Kiss and [Tim Vigil's] Grips, both of which were very dark portrayals of violence coupled with sexuality. Stores were getting raided and owners and managers locked up. It was a tough time, and I can't blame anyone for being nervous.

On top of that, Dan's mother was closely involved in both his businesses. At the time he was worried about upsetting her. I think eventually her attitude was "If it makes money, why not?" She was Italian and had a different view on sexuality than most Americans.

The story I showed Dan and Scott opened with a guy looking at a *Playboy* and contemplating masturbation (he opens his fly), and then being teased by his friends when they nearly catch him in the act. One of the guys is annoyed and asks why the main protagonist doesn't just go down the hall and nail one of the girls on the next corridor. "Everyone knows she likes you." Well, maybe everyone but our boy…

The story was intended to show the learning curve involved in "reading signals" in the midst of hormonal change. As adolescents, we don't always know what the game is - if someone actually likes us, or doesn't, wants us, or doesn't. It's a dance we do until we figure out the rules, and once the rules are understood, they change.

It was a subject that fascinated me in college, and still does to a lesser degree. At the time I was doing it, it was just a story I had an interest in. But when Dan made noises about being uncomfortable, I became *passionate* about it.

There was no actual sexuality, no "bad" words, nothing I felt was out of line or wrong in any way. There were some jokes being thrown around Slave Labor about my being a pervert, or "in heat", and all I could think about was how tame I was being, and how hypocritical everyone else was being. We went to lunch every day and drooled over attractive waitresses. We made sex jokes and used language that was a million times worse in our everyday life than I had used in that ten pages. I was irritated as hell that I was getting teased about it.

As anyone who knows me will tell you, when I become passionate about something, you can't stop me. So I pulled the story from Slave Labor and took it to Piranha Press, the offshoot of DC comics that had just begun. Mark Nevelow, the E-I-C of Piranha, was a big fan of the Strips pitch and really wanted to put it out as one of his lead titles. I had the misfortune (or fortune, in hindsight) of being on Jenette Kahn's desk the same day the distributors all went nuts about nudity and sexual themes showing up in comics.

So Strips got rejected by Jenette, which broke Mark's heart, and mine. I took it to Kitchen Sink, and they sent one of the rudest rejection letters I've ever received, saying basically I didn't have the skill to make it worthwhile, ever. It was a particularly low point, for me.

BL: So, your ability has been questioned consistently throughout your career?

CA: And always will be until long after I'm dead. It's the nature of working in a creative business. You can't please all the people all the time. Even Alan doesn't sell what he

once did. Anyhow, then Rip Off Press picked Strips up and asked if it could be more sexual, more graphic. I said absolutely no problem, and the rest is history. Eventually I had some legal problems in the divorce with my first wife and I stopped doing comics altogether. I began again recently, self-publishing Strips, and enjoyed it, but it was a lot of work.

BL: Did you make any money out of it?
CA: A little. I'd probably make a lot more if I published a trade right now, though. I'm thinking about it.

BL: From a design point of view, it was quite a nice package even for a porn book. I suppose it gave an idea to anyone following your career that you had more strings to your bow. However, do you think porn comics are good for this industry? And is there any other reason for producing them other than functional?
CA: That's an interesting question. Do I think they're good for the industry? Hmm. First let's separate my work from the work of others. I think *my* porn is good for the industry, yes *(laughs)*. But I always felt I did have "more strings in my bow" and still do. The story behind Strips would have surprised you. The underlying theme was about child abuse, and its effects on adults and the relationships they form. It was unfolding slowly, too slowly, obviously. A friend once told me it wasn't prurient in many ways. In fact, he found it uncomfortable because it was too real.

Is there any reason for producing porn other than functional? I assume by that you mean "so people can whack off?" Then my answer would have to be "yes", absolutely there is a reason. Or multiple reasons, because people will still whack off.

The story I wanted to do was about how child abuse creates a loss of boundaries, and relationship mistakes that are made because there is no "school" for proper behavior with another person as regards sexual and personal intimacy. If your only understanding of sex is "Don't do it!" from prudish, nervous parents steeped in religion, then when the situation presents itself it's going to be anything but romantic and wonderful. Funny. Painful. Embarrassing. Exciting. A lot of things, but not wonderful or romantic.

Being a creator from the "show-don't-tell" school of writing, I felt it was important to show the sex in all its unrefined glory and reality. Lee cries in her first encounter with Zack. Zack has sex with a virgin and hurts her in more ways than one. We see it happening and it involves us more, as a reader.

Telling a story in real terms, with real people and situations, is much more than "functional." It's what every writing instructor tells you to do on day one.

BL: After that there's a gap in my knowledge. You seemed to reappear a couple of years ago, and within a very short space of time became Joe Quesada's favourite son.
CA: He officially adopted me last week. I'm now Chuck Austen-Quesada.

BL: Where did you go?
CA: A long way away from here. I hated comics and never wanted to have anything to do with them again, so I went into computer games and animation. Then I left drawing entirely and went into television production. Then the work dried up and I came back. I was going to self-publish Strips again at my wife's suggestion, but I put together a War Machine proposal instead, which made her nervous and angry, and then BOOM. Top o' the world, Ma!

BL: There were themes you addressed in War Machine that people at the time felt were... contentious. I read somewhere of an accusation that you were possibly jumping on the controversy bandwagon (the one Quesada and Jemas had instigated almost within an hour of taking charge of the company).
CA: It's funny the perspective from outside the industry. I might have thought the same thing were I looking at it from the outside.

Contentious? Intentionally? No, not at all. Not that I mind being contentious. I think there is no such thing as bad controversy, and Marvel certainly bears that out. But I didn't create War Machine to be contentious. I did it to get a job. Bluntly, I needed the work, or I was going to have to go back to *King of the Hill*, which I had come to despise.

My wife suggested self-publishing Strips again to avoid going back to Film Roman. I had recently discovered the joys of computer graphics and how they could assist with things like drawing cars and buildings, things I loathe drawing. I was working out the mechanics of the process and showing them to people when a friend suggested I do Iron Man just for fun. He thought the computer lent itself to something more mechanical like that, and so I gave it a go.

I built a 3D War Machine model because I thought it was cooler than the Iron Man armor, more macho with the guns and stuff. And when I was done, I thought, "Hey, this is pretty cool." So I did some sample covers, a logo, I started coming up with a story about racism, and before long I'd wasted about a week and a half of my hiatus time from *King of the Hill*, time I was supposed to be using getting Strips ready for self-publishing. At the time, it was all

just for fun. My wife was *not* happy.

Then, as a lark, I sent the package to Joe, along with a mini-comic of the first six or eight pages of the story. Joe went nuts. The proposal wasn't what interested him, so much. I had hooked him with my storytelling skills.

In fact, even though they really wanted to do War Machine, they were hoping to get Bendis, Joe's other blue-eyed boy, to script it for me. No one was willing to trust my writing skills at the time.

Initially the proposal was for a regular Marvel book set in continuity. I wanted to make it a little more violent, but figured there was no chance Joe would let me go the way I thought it *should* go. I was wrong. People were reacting really well to things like The Authority, which is wall-to-wall hard-core violence, and Joe wanted to see that same take on War Machine. He pushed to include it in the MAX line and do it out of continuity so I could be free to be as nasty as I wanted to be.

By default, and because no one else wanted to do it, I got to write War Machine. The story I wrote was just a story I wanted to do. I didn't make any effort to make it more contentious than it already was. This is mostly just how I write when I'm writing for myself. Language, violence, etc. The story was based on actual events and technology being developed, so how could it be intentionally controversial? This shit happens in life. If people have a problem with the content, move to Disneyland.

The scene where Fury plays the videotape of the murder is based on an actual case that happened here in Los Angeles with some local drug dealers. The crux of the story, isolating genetic difference for ethnic cleansing, is something that is discussed by intelligent, thoughtful, elite racist scientists in this country. Conversations between Rhodey and Parnell are based on conversations I used to have with my African-American roommate, and conversations she used to have with African-American friends.

I deal with things that bother me through my creativity. As we do this interview, there is a hideously sick, demented, pervert who kidnapped a five year old girl from her front yard, raped and tortured her and dumped her body about an hour away from here. I have two girls about that age. This stuff affects me on a profound level. I wrote a Superman story about he and Lois having a miscarriage right after my wife had one. DC said "no", and we changed the centerpiece of the story to something else, but that's how I dealt with the emotion of that situation. 9-11? The Call. Parental issues? Strips. Religion? Satan's Little Girl *[more about this on page 12].*

If my work seems intentionally contentious, then somebody get me another life, please, because I write from personal experience. I don't know any other way to. If that played into Joe and Bill's plans, well, lucky for me.

BL: So does it seem to you that you're regarded by many as Joey's blue-eyed-boy?
CA: It doesn't seem that way to me, but I won't argue the point with you. You probably hear from Joe more than I do, or people who work with Joe. I'm pretty isolated here in Los Angeles. Joe's a busy guy and I almost never talk to him. He rarely even e-mails. Everyone seems happy with my work, but I don't get the sense of any special treatment. I'm not making ten thousand dollars a script. I know he was jokingly unhappy when he heard I was working for the Distinguished Competition on Superman fill-ins. I told him if he didn't like it to give me more work!

BL: I heard that you originally pitched War Machine to Joe as a 3-year weekly series or something equally outrageous? Why? And frankly, what were you on?
CA: I was high on life, man! Still am!

Actually, I pitched it as a monthly, ongoing color comic, but in a black and white, manga-esque proposal package. In our discussions of it, I told Joe I could do it weekly because at the time, I had an animation studio behind me with guys looking for work. He decided to test the waters with a 12 issue miniseries and asked how much I could do if we were going to keep it going. I told him I had ideas of going out for three years, on a weekly schedule. From there, I've been turned into a geek with no life who sits around thinking of nothing but War Machine.

BL: What was the story with Elektra #6 (which appeared to be conveniently sold to Dynamic Forces to fleece the fanboys of their money in the name of Assassin snatch)? Was the way that issue was marketed intended to deliberately boost interest in the title?
CA: Hell no! I was desperately in fear of my job for about three days on that one. It was a simple mistake. I had done the pages prior to San Diego Con of that year. I sent them to Brian [Bendis] and [editor] Stuart [Moore] and asked them to check them over, knowing they were risky. I had followed Brian's script and it had called for Elektra to be nude, and I thought I'd push it, and Stuart could cover her with balloons and whatnot. If it was a problem, I'd re-do the art. No big deal. Hire an ex-porn guy, this is what you get. Wait 'til you see X-Men. Full frontal nudity!

When Stuart came to San Diego, he missed the package I had sent, then when he got back and saw the pages he and Brian, rather than make me re-draw them because of the time crunch, figured they could obscure all the naughty bits. Joe didn't feel they were obscured enough. I tell ya, I didn't feel like Joe's blue-eyed boy *that* day.

And no one held a gun to any fanboys' heads and made them buy Elektra booty. They wrote their own checks and not to me, that's for sure, so there was no motivation for me at all.

BL: Do you have a thick skin?
CA: Most of the time. But don't test the limits. When I go, I go big.

BL: Because you get a lot of criticism thrown your way, but you seem quite resilient.
CA: Art school training. They hang your work on the wall and tell you why you suck. Not your work - *you*,

for not listening to the teacher. Either you hang in there, or you leave crying and give up. I'm not a quitter.

BL: Work by Chuck Austen rarely gets rave reviews and many people have wondered how the hell you could get the gig writing such a high profile Marvel title as Uncanny X-Men.
CA: Me included. I think the phrase you're looking for is, "Where the hell does he get off?"

It was pure luck. I had a good working relationship with the editors when I wrote the Gambit fill-in 2 parter on Ultimate X-Men. That led to me getting Uncanny when Casey left. They just liked my writing and wanted to keep working with me. It was a leap of faith on their part. The new editors still like working with me, and they still like the scripts.

BL: You are, however, following mixed company - some illustrious and others deemed hacks. You are expected to fail and fail with honours.
CA: Cool. I love a challenge.

BL: I seem to recall the same thing happening to Scott Lobdell when he took over Uncanny and I was his biggest critic. But he grew into the role and made the book his own, and I see you as being in very much the same position right now.
CA: This is an industry of fan wannabes. They all want to write the X-Men, and no one can do it as well as them. Every artist I talk to these days wants me to help him get the gig drawing X-Men. The X-Men is considered to be the pinnacle of success in this business. Did I earn it? Wait and see.

BL: So what do you think was different about your proposal? I presume you pitched for the book, and if you didn't I'm sure [editor] Mike [Marts] would want to know what you have planned!
CA: Oh, he knows. I'm about a year into it already. So even if they fire me, they're stuck with me for at least a year.

BL: Why do you think they went for what you have planned, and not some other guy's ideas?
CA: What was different about my proposal is something they'd been wanting to get back in the book for a while. My idea was to look at the X-Men as it currently existed, then look at what had made me love it as a kid, and reconcile the two. So the basic question I asked was: "What made me love it then, and what has been lost now?"

What I loved about the series as an alienated teenager was the sense of hope and fun that the book offered. The first few pages of Giant Sized X-Men nailed me to the wall. It was a simple set-up which involved Xavier showing up one day to these random kids and saying, "You're special. I'd like you to come join me in my journey." Then he gave them a cool house, great toys to play with, other hormonal young teenagers to hang out with, and all the girls were mostly naked! How can it get any better than that? And Xavier was saying "Go! Enjoy yourselves! All I ask is that you occasionally do some exciting missions for me." Who would say "no"?

It was basically taking that sense of teenage isolation, and fear, and angst, and offering it hope. Offering it escape. Providing it with great friends who were all new like you, all on the same level, and a loving father looking over it all, accepting you for what you were. Hell, celebrating you for what you were.

Throw into that mix some romance, some soap opera, some humor and some hi-octane action, and I believed we could bring back the core of what the X-Men was supposed to be, in my ever-so-humble opinion.

It was something that I think had been lost, recently, with all the post-Dark Knight grime and muck that has been thrown over the face of comics in recent years. Comics don't have to be dark to be adult. The X-Men isn't about darkness and angst. It's about hope for the future, and getting away from darkness and angst.

Most of the other proposals were along the line of "I'll bring back Magneto and make him *more* powerful than ever before, and there'll be a big fight with the all-new Brotherhood..."

Marvel liked my proposal better.

BL: Do you think you are worthy of writing such a high-profile book, and if so, why?
CA: Marvel thinks so. Right *now* I feel worthy. I have always believed in my own talent and skill. It's a confidence flaw. Something deep down inside me is secure. Of course, ask me again in three months, when people are burning effigies of me and asking for my balls on a stake.

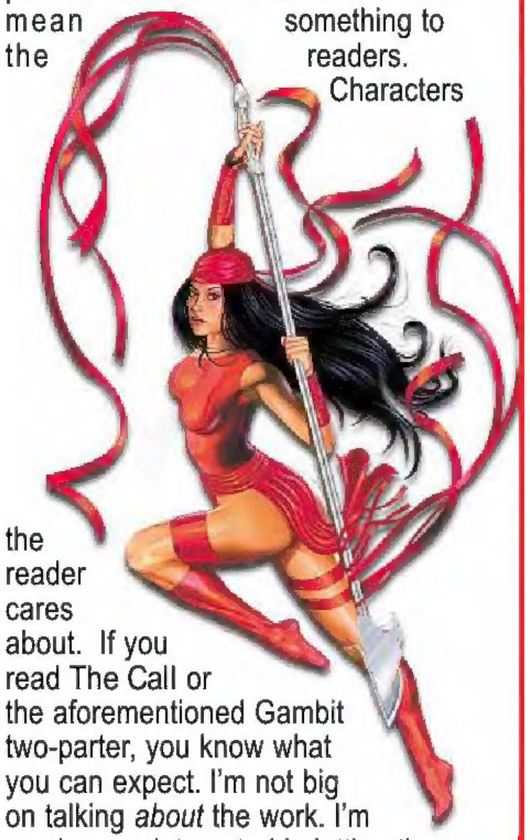
BL: You're behind the times, mate, they hang, draw and eighth you nowadays. Apparently quartering's too good for you!
CA: Sounds like good clean fun. Let's give it a go!

BL: What are your plans for the title and do you think you can out-Morrison Morrison, or are you not even going to bother and just do it your way?
CA: I *am* trying to outdo him in sales, definitely.

BL: Realistically speaking, do you really believe you can do that, especially against him of the cult of personality?
CA: Hell, no. But it's my goal. Everyone's got to have a goal, otherwise you're treading water. Besides, I've got a little trick up my sleeve...

My goal is to make Uncanny the number one Marvel book again. I don't think Marvel expects any less from someone they entrust their books to. I don't expect any less from myself. I'm a different writer than Morrison, though. He does what he does brilliantly, and I write a different kind of story.

My way is to tell personal, powerful stories with characters that mean something to the readers. Characters the reader cares about. If you read The Call or the aforementioned Gambit two-parter, you know what you can expect. I'm not big on talking *about* the work. I'm much more interested in letting the work speak for itself.



BL: Are you going to stick with the current roster of X-Men? And are you going to play around with existing villains, or pull a "Frank Tieri" and make up a whole host of worthless enemies for the X-Men?
CA: "Whole host of worthless

enemies". Man, you guys are uppity for nerds who read superhero comics. This is fun!

BL: You don't think I thought all these questions up on my own, did you? I haven't read an X-Men comic in about four years, so I enlisted the aid of a bunch of X-nerds from the Borderline internet forum! But...
CA: My roster is as follows: Iceman, Archangel, Nightcrawler, Stacy X, Northstar, Havok, and some players to be named later.

BL: For the benefit of those people like myself - who the &^%$ is Stacy X and, possibly more importantly, is Northstar still gay? ☺
CA: *(laughs hard)* Stacy X is this nasty, skanky piece of $#!+ that Casey created, and for some lame reason I decided to keep around. She's an ex-mutant prostitute who, as of Casey's last issue, is still tricking.

Actually, she's turned out to be fun to write. She has some of the best lines and some of the greatest asides about the X-Men it has been my pleasure to write, and she creates tension and unity for the others as someone not to like. I just wrote a scene with her that, if it gets through, will be one of the most talked about things ever to appear in an X-Men comic. It involves videotape and a jump rope.

And Northstar is definitely gay. Trust me. It's going to be a riot.

I intend to use both old and new villains. I hope to create a *ton* of worthless enemies that will fall into limbo after I'm gone and they've begged Casey to come back and fix everything I've done wrong.

BL: That sounds like good forward planning!
CA: *(laughs)* Gotta stay ready. Look, Transformers is currently the number one comic in the Diamond top fifty list. Next week, it could be Casper the Friendly Ghost. And just how long do you think I'll last if Casper gets the better of me?

BL: What do you have you planned for the future - where do you see yourself in three years from now?
CA: Probably right here, but fatter and three years older.

It's hard for me to predict the future. If someone had said three years ago I'd be working in comics again and writing an X-Men book, I would have laughed in their face, had a heart attack and died.

BL: What TV do you watch?
CA: Disney channel and Nickelodeon. *SpongeBob SquarePants*. I have two kids. When I get the time I watch a *lot* of the History Channel. I love history and archaeology.

BL: What music are you into?
CA: Lots of bizarre stuff. Everything from Enya to Dean Martin to Hothouse Flowers, from 3rd Force to Garbage to the Mills Brothers, from Linkin Park to U2, from The Chieftains to Jane Siberry, Prince, No Doubt, Marc Cohn, Billy Joel, Bruce Hornsby, Ohio Players, Britney Spears, the Spice Girls, Hanson (I have two kids).

BL: What's your favourite drink?
CA: Grape Juice. I'm a teetotaller.

BL: Favourite artist?
CA: Too many to list. I love the old guys. The Buscemas, Romitas, Frazetta, Alex Raymond, Lee Elias, Johnny Craig, on and on and on. I love the new guys, Dave Finch, Sean Phillips, Ron Garney, Paolo Serpieri, Danijel Zezelj, Tom Raney, Mike Allred, Amanda Conner, Rags Morales and on and on and on...

I hate listing because I don't want to leave anyone out.

BL: Writer?
CA: Again, too many to list. I'm reading a lot of Sharon Shinn these days. Andy McNab. If I had to pick, my all time favorite author is probably Mark Twain.

BL: Who do you really like working with?
CA: My editors at Marvel. Those guys are a lot of fun. Sean Phillips has given me some amazing work on X-Men. Dave Finch is stupendous. Ron Garney's a blast. Danijel on The Call - Wagon [due from Marvel in October] has done some gorgeous stuff. I love most of the guys I work with.

BL: Does Ann think you should get a real job?
CA: She encouraged me to quit the old one and do this! How's that for the perfect wife?

BL: And you live where? Stepford?
CA: *(laughs)*

BL: Can I just say, Chuck, that this has been a good bit of fun.
CA: It has. Not the usual mundane interview with tons of "Can you bring back Muto-boy from issue 279?"

BL: I'm impressed with your attitude and I hope you do well in your time on the X-books (my friend Scott Lobdell will kill me if he reads that).
CA: Thanks. I don't know if I could survive with any other attitude. Not in this industry.

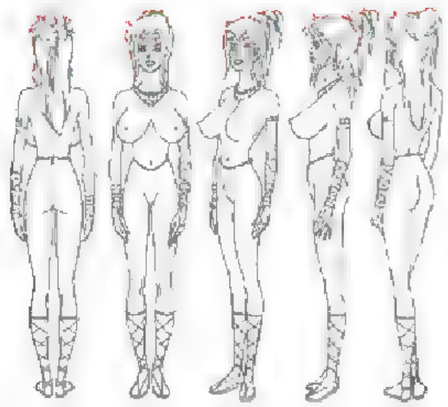
BL: I had this feeling that you might be a little touchy about your seemingly chequered past.
CA: Nah, no regrets about anything. I used to wear diapers and crap myself and wished like mad to grow up to be an astronaut. You live and you grow.

BL: Thanks for your time!
CA: You're quite welcome.

SATAN'S LITTLE GIRL

Chuck Austen also told Borderline about an ongoing unpublished project of his.

"THIS is a project I announced when I was self-publishing, and still get asked about. It began as animation, and morphed into a comic/graphic novel when I began White Buffaloe Press. It currently only exists as a screenplay and about thirty pages of layouts. The character sheets are from the animation stage. The cover roughs were all done as an homage/satire of the Gil Kane covers from the '70s Marvel horror line dealing with Satan's kids, Son of Satan and Satana. The covers from that period are some of my favorites ever for any comicbook. I loved Gil's stuff, especially when he was paired with Romita or Giacoia.



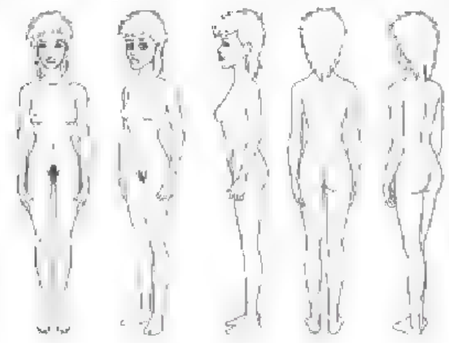
"Satan's Little Girl is my Salman Rushdie piece that will get the Catholics and Christians trying to have me killed. Cat Stevens will convert back from Islam just so he can condemn me.

"It's the story of a nice woman named Sandy who does everything for other people, so much so that she's trampled on. A real Pollyanna. But she's not living the perfect Christian life and when she dies unexpectedly one day, she's shocked to find out she's going to Hell. It's all true, God condemns you forever and always for stealing paper clips and having sex out of wedlock.

"While in Hell, she befriends Satan's daughter, Sibyl, who feels her father is completely misunderstood. "Has anyone ever really read the Bible?", she asks. God is an abusive tyrant who lies, cheats and allows his followers to rape, plunder and kill against the will of his own commandments. Her father was just a rebellious child who had had enough of the bullshit and told dad off. So dad ran him underground, forced him into this thankless, horrible job, and keeps him oppressed because he's a prick.

"Satan's daughter, worried for her depressed father, wants our heroine, a petite little woman with a girlish figure and small breasts, to help her set the record straight. Sibyl offers Sandy whatever Sandy's heart desires in exchange for helping her on Earth to show people that Satan is misunderstood. She wants the world to know the truth, that he's a loving father and kind man who just stood up for what he believed. Sandy agrees in exchange for large breasts and a hot boyfriend who treats her well. And a nice apartment.

"The two return to Earth, and the question is, is this a trick on Satan's part, or is Satan really as his daughter presents him? Does God actually sit in heaven watching football (American football) and taking the praise offered by players after touchdowns? Does he really help movie stars get their starring roles rather than helping starving children in Guyana?



"And that's the crux of the series. If I ever get it published, it would force me into hiding, most likely. But I'm still probably going to do it. I feel compelled."

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MEANWHILE, BACK AT THE X-OFFICE...

Phil Hall also spoke to Marvel's X-books editor Mike Marts about Chuck Austen's role in his plans, and about being an X-editor in general.

Mike Marts: Thanks for the opportunity to bash Chuck. Heheh.

BL: What appealed to you guys about Chuck's proposal?
MM: I wish I could take full credit or any credit at all in the decision to hire Chuck Austen as writer of Uncanny X-Men... but my predecessors on the title took care of that earlier in the year, and for that, I am eternally grateful to them. It was a brilliant move which left me with nothing but an easy transition into working on Uncanny.

BL: Were you or any of your colleagues concerned that he has a bit of a reputation for being... nothing spectacular?
MM: Nope, not at all. Prior to Chuck writing War Machine for Marvel, I hadn't read a single issue by the guy... so to me, Chuck was a total newcomer in my eyes. Kind of strange for a guy who's been in the business longer than me, but maybe that played to Chuck's advantage. What I do know is that after reading War Machine it was easy to see that Marvel had a new star on its hands. So, internally, all of us at Marvel were convinced of Chuck's talent early on.

BL: Would you agree that it's going to be difficult for any writer coming onto a book like Uncanny X-Men, because they'll all have certain standards to live up to (and I'm not just talking about Claremont either)?
MM: Hell, it's always tough for a new writer coming on to any book... and something like Uncanny X-Men, with such a long and complex history of characters and creators, is even tougher. But Chuck's had no problems adjusting to the hardships usually associated with coming on to a flagship title like the X-Men. He's like the guy who the Yankees drag up from the minor leagues and who starts hitting homeruns the moment he gets to the plate.

BL: It always looked as though Morrison and Casey were writing against each other rather than as a team. Was it a wise move on the part of Marvel editorial to have two such disparate writers on their now flagship titles?
MM: One of Joe Q. and Bill J.'s main objectives with the X-Men titles two years ago was to cull away any titles that seemed to repeat each other. It was important for each book to have its own voice and to be significantly different from any of the other X-titles. I think that readers of the X-books had been

cheated for way too long with stories, characters and titles that were all repetitive and sadly interchangeable. What we have now is diversification and I think the fans are thankful for that. Exiles is not the book that X-Static is. Wolverine is not the book that Soldier X is. And New X-Men is definitely not the book that Uncanny is. And I believe the readers are appreciative of that.

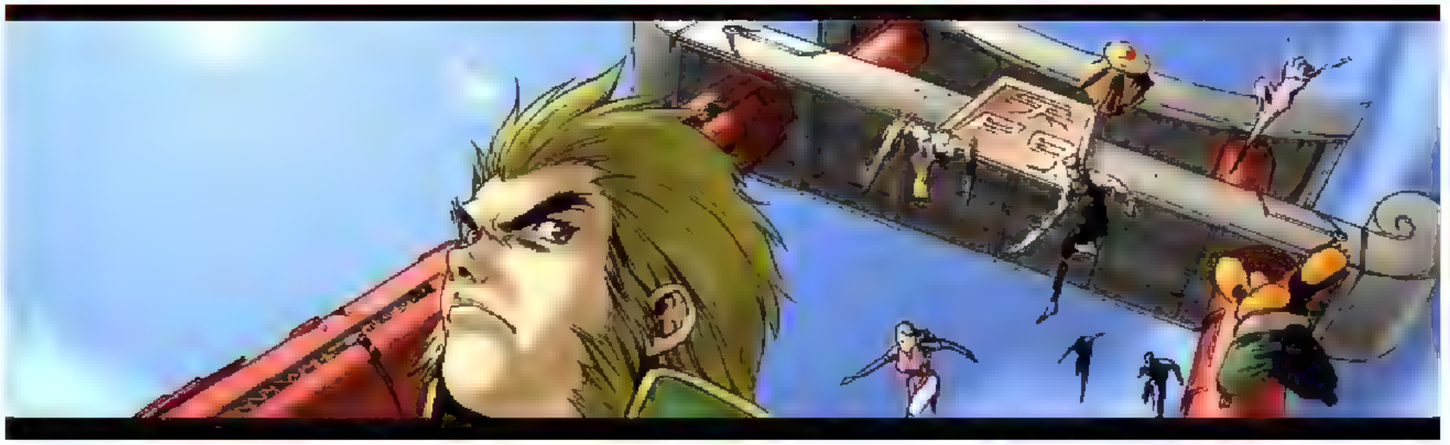
So... to make a long answer short, I think it's a good move to have two writers whose storytelling styles are significantly different, but not if they're writing against each other. What we have now with Grant and Chuck is a nice situation. They keep aware of what the other guy is doing and try not to contradict each other's stories, but as along as the characters remain consistent throughout both books, Chuck and Grant are pretty much left to their own devices.

BL: Is there anything that has happened in the X-books in previous editors' reigns that you'd change or change back if you could and would you allow abrupt change if the right story or idea came along?
MM: I try not to mess too much with what's gone on before or try to retro-fit or undo something in continuity just because I myself didn't like it. That's an insult to the readers and to the creators who've worked on the book before. Sure, some ideas or stories in the past might have been stinkers... but let's accept that and not waste three issues trying to undo what some writer did ten years ago. I'd rather my writers concentrate their efforts on moving forward and creating new ideas.

BL: What would be your ideal comicbook - your dream gig?
MM: You're looking at it.

BL: Do you like being the editor on a franchise of titles that is potentially fraught with fear?
MM: Wouldn't have it any other way. The job isn't fun if there isn't challenge involved.

MONKEY MAGIC!



KEVIN LAU's Anarchy Studios continues its association with Harris Publishing by following up the **Vampi** series with something closer to Lau's upbringing in Hong Kong: **Xin: Legend of the Monkey King**.

It's based on the classic text **Journey To The West** by Wu Ch'eng-en, a fanciful series of tales of gods, men and anthropomorphic animal characters, set in 630AD (though written down in the 16th Century). The tale is woven around the true story of a journey from China to India, undertaken by a Tang priest named Hsuan Tsang in order to obtain Buddhist scriptures to bring enlightenment to the world. Adapted into English by Arthur Waley in 1943, the legends have since resurfaced in numerous different incarnations; on stage, on screen, as prose and as a number of diverse manga interpretations. **Xin** is Lau's attempt to popularise the legends for a Western comics audience, with a retro-futuristic flavour.

A taster for the series is already available: the **Xin: Alpha Preview Edition**, featuring a first look at the series, conceptual sketches, and a step-by-step explanation of how the artistic process develops from initial thumbnails through to fully painted colour pages. Comments are also made by co-plotters Kevin Lau and Udon Studios' Erik Ko, and scripter Jay Faerber, whose Image series **Noble Causes** is a favourite at Borderline Towers.

Lau and Ko talked to **Borderline**'s Jay Eales about **Xin**.

Borderline: What drew you to the subject material of the Monkey King legends in the first place?

Erik Ko: I believe this story is in every Chinese person's roots. I doubt if there is a single Chinese that would not know about the Monkey King!

Kevin Lau: The story of the Monkey King is a must for parents to tell their children, and it is also a popular subject in kids' books in the Orient. And as we grew up, we saw different adaptations of the story by different creators, but none of them, we feel, that has the true feeling of the story.

EK: The original story has a lot of in-depth exploration of the human emotions and characteristics like love, honour, respect, etc. And we feel that most of the adaptations do not really show too much of that and mainly just focus on the fantasy side of the story. Therefore, we would like to do our take on it, while doing a good action book, also concentrating on the character relationships and the morals of the stories.

BL: Are you familiar at all with the Japanese NTV television series Monkey, *starring Masaaki Sakai? That was quite possibly the way that most of our UK and US readers will have been introduced to Monkey and his fellow pilgrims.*

KL: I have never heard about the show. So I have no idea what it is about.

EK: I knew it existed, but I have never seen an episode of it.

BL: Could you give our readers a little background on the main characters, and how they correspond to their legendary counterparts?

EK: We are playing up the characters so that it will be more accessible to the English-speaking readers. In our story, Xin is the Monkey King. Arrogant as ever, Xin will start to learn about responsibilities, honour and such during the course of his journey with his colleagues. A girl with the purest of hearts, named Sanzen, will represent the role of the Monk. She has a mission to travel to the West of the world to rid it of the evils there.

KL: And let's not forget the robot Zinc, which is pretty much our version of Sandy. And there is a humanoid Pig named Tein [often named Pigsy in the legends].

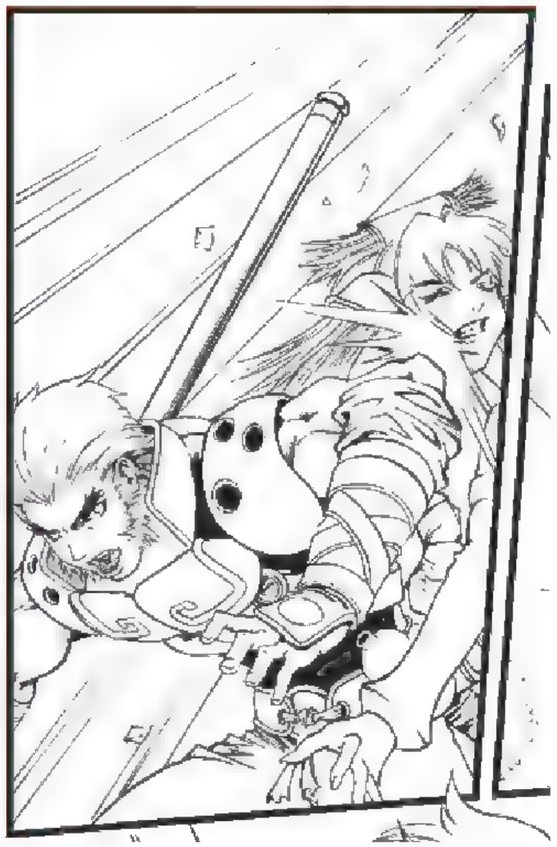
BL: Is Xin to be an ongoing series, or a miniseries? What frequency of publication will it have? Is there a launch date for the first proper issue yet?

EK: Our plan is to make Xin a set of miniseries within an ongoing title. As they travel through different places, each destination they visit would be a miniseries story arc that has a beginning and end. And of course, the whole story is linked by the main goal of heading to the west to seal the Doorway of the Devil. This way, the story can be more organized and fast paced. It will also be easier for new readers to pick up on a story arc and start reading the book any time.

KL: Our first arc will run through issues 1 to 3, titled *The Original Sin*. It basically gives the readers the background to the characters Xin and Sanzen, and sets them up for the mission. Xin #1 is scheduled to ship in November 2002.

BL: Obviously, Journey To The West is a lengthy piece of work, and any comic adapted from it will have to focus on only part of it. What aspect of the story are you going to be concentrating on?

KL: The story of Xin is going to be a spin of the Monkey King story, which means that we will not be following every detail of the 100 chapters of the original tale. Depending on how well the readers are liking it, we would definitely want to include as many stories and destinations as



possible. However, in the end they have to arrive at the West of the world, and the story has to somehow conclude.

EK: As mentioned before, one of the most important elements of the original tale that fascinates us is the morals behind the stories, how the characters and events actually reflect real life. So we will be playing up that side and making sure that Xin is a character-driven book.

BL: There have been a number of stories drawing inspiration from the Monkey legends, but very few available in the West, or recognisable from the source material. I remember Marvel attempted something with their Epic Comics Heavy Hitters imprint, called Dragon Lines, but it wasn't terribly good. Are there any other versions of the legends that you would recommend?

EK: One recent classic is Dragonball (the original one, not DBZ), which is very loosely based on the Monkey King story. But the best one I've found is the Leiji (Starblazers) Matsumoto Japanese anime adaptation from the 70s, titled StarZinger, in which a team of four has to travel through space in their spaceships to obtain some form of energy to save their planet.

KL: I think there are more Japanese adaptations out there, like the recent Saiyuki series. But really none of the Japanese anime/manga versions has done the original story justice. That is why we feel that we should do something about this story!

BL: Can you describe the process of creating Xin that you'll be employing, since the two of you are the driving force of the project but Jay Faerber will be supplying the dialogue or finished scripts? How will that work? How much control over the finished product will you have, and how much freedom will Jay have to do his own thing?

KL: To start with, me and Erik will be on the phone day after day brainstorming ideas that we want to use in the story. From characters, to settings, to minor details, to camera angle to action sequences, we go through everything together and come up with a very basic plot. Then Erik will start putting all these notes together into a page-by-page plot.

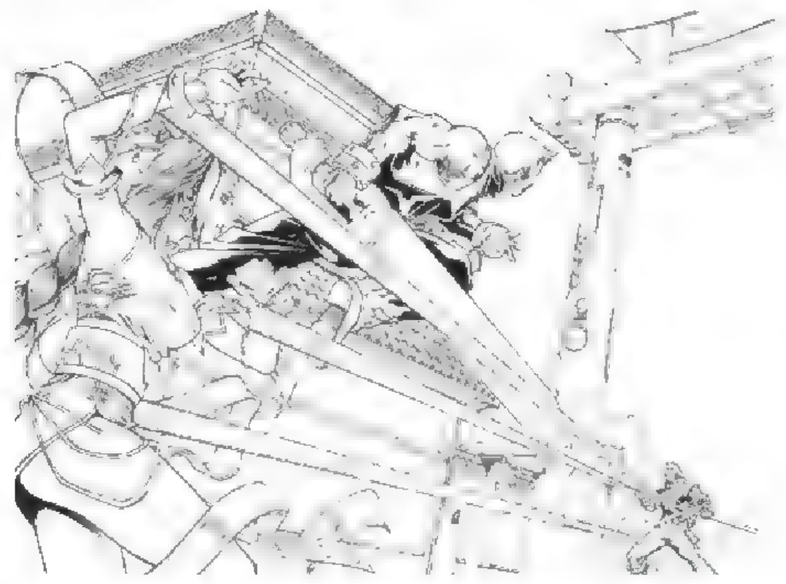
EK: It is like putting a puzzle together. I will have pages and pages of notes after the brainstorming and will need to figure out how I can fit them into a 20 page issue. Of course, we will have to be selective about what we are putting in. After I have sorted out all the notes, we will have some basic events that need to take place in an issue as well as what kind of moral message we want to relay to the readers. And I will do up a page-by-page breakdown with detailed description of what is going on, and explain why we need to do this and that. I will try to get as much detail as possible in the writing, except during action sequences. I will leave it to Kevin to work out the fights.

KL: When I get the plots back from Erik, I will start the page layouts according to what he wrote. Lengthy action sequences are normally left open so that I can do whatever I want, and I like that a lot, because when I draw fight sequences, I have this vision that will kick in only after I start doing the scene. I like the creative freedom that would allow me to go crazy on the action.

EK: Once we have the layouts from Kevin, I will start polishing the plot and break it down to a panel-by-panel stage for every page, including Kevin's fight scenes. I will also go into detail about key points in the dialogue that are needed in each section. Then, the whole package will be sent to Jay for scripting.

KL: We have Jay on board because we know he is a very capable writer. Jay can take our ideas and put the necessary words in the characters' mouths to make them come to life.

EK: We trust Jay a lot and even though we are the ones plotting the story, I think it is more like a team effort between all parties involved to make this project something special.



INTERNET SOUL SEARCHING

After spending a few nights searching for Don Heck on the Internet and then telling us all about it, David McLintock decided, without informing us, that this was going to be a semi-regular column... Good job we all like Dick Ayers, then...

IN SEARCH OF... DICK AYERS

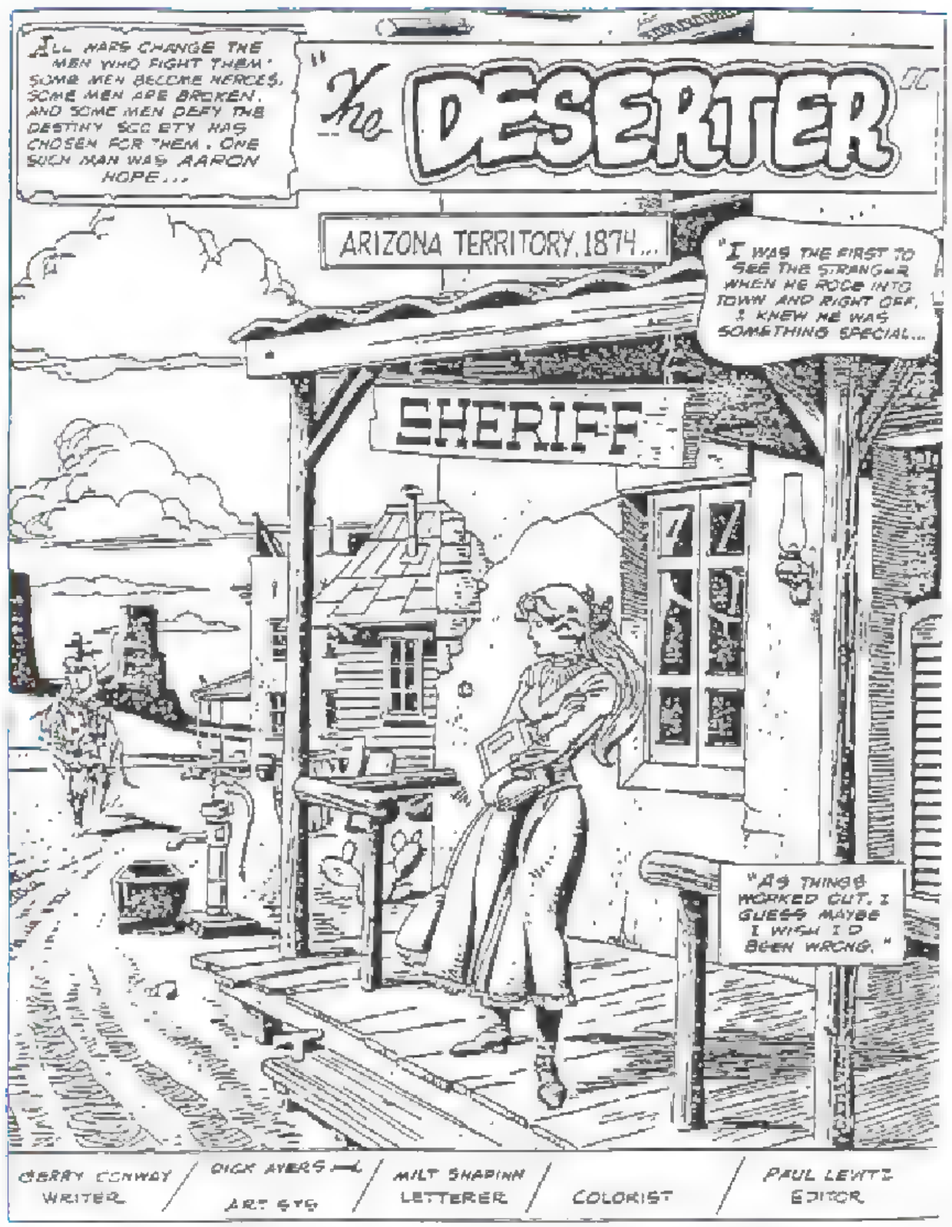
SEARCH engines are curmudgeonly beasties. One time you key in "Dick+Ayers" and you get 10,968 pages found, the next, 1,117 pages found, albeit by following another search engine's links. Lycos, incredibly, claimed 52,349 results. So finding dear old Dick looked like being a bit of a doddle. Until of course you find that (and there genuinely is no joke intended here) every Tom, Dick and Harry is included in the 52,000. First up is the doubtless unputdownable "Dick Smith Flyer", a breathtaking rollercoaster of a read through a leaflet compiled by Mr. Smith and his chums in relation to air safety reform in Australia. Try as I might I could find not one reference to Ghost Rider or Sgt. Fury and His Howling Commandos in this magnificent treatise. But I digress. As usual the majority of sites accessed either were comics for sale vehicles, indices, or made some passing reference to some guy named Dick or Ayers, and occasionally, *the* Dick Ayers. And, just like with the Dashing Don Heck, there was an "Ayers Family Journal Index". I'd tell you the address, but you slavering genealogists out there will have found it first. All I can say is that an awful lot of Ayers' were getting hitched in the 1850s. I don't suppose there was a lot of other entertainment back in those frontier days. Which brings us to the "Thomas Jefferson Family Tree". One Simpson Green "Dick" Ayers, born 27/10/1820, is related to the great man. Jefferson, that is. Possibly also the comics legend too. If you care to dig far enough.

Our old friends at *sammci* (Silver Age Marvel Comics Cover Index) are at it again with "15 Great Dick Ayers Covers". At *www.samcci.comics.org/_artists/ayers.htm* there are 9 featuring Sgt. Fury, surely the world's oldest secret agent, but also, rather bizarrely, Fantastic Four #1. Even the caption here identifies Kirby's inker as the totally mysterious "Chris Rule". Tracking him down, and indeed the true identity of FF#1's inker has proved fascinating sport for many, notably *twomorrows.com*, who examine this mystery at *www.twomorrows.com/kirby/articles/09fftrivia.html*. Apparently rumours abounded that letterer Artie Simek applied the brush to Jack's pencils, but more recently credit has passed to the aforementioned Mr. Rule, an old time pal of the King's. Virtually nothing is known of him; "he died in the 60s, but no-one has ever provided specific info". One for the next séance, then.

Buy some Ayers original art from The Book Palace on *www.bookpalace.com/acatalog/Home* specifically page 20 from Rawhide Kid #59. It's yours for £250. If you get out of the site. Try as I might I was stuck there, no matter what I clicked. Just as long as the postman doesn't appear tomorrow with a funny shaped envelope, along with a hefty invoice, I think I may have managed it eventually. *www.comiclink.com/artwants.htm* promises to pay big money for an Ayers "action splash page from Sgt.Fury and His Howling Commandos". They also sell art so it may not just be for sentimental reasons they make their plea. A potential earner for Mr Ayers perhaps? Because, joy of joys, not only is the Silver Age mainstay still with us, he still picks up his brushes when asked. *www.coincidental.net/comics/creators/Ayers_Dick* was the first site with biog info. Ayers is 78 years young and still active. He has been "doing comics" (not my English) since 1948 (just pre-Phil Hall era then) when assigned to the Jmmy Durante comicbook by Magazine Enterprises, having pencilled a couple of stories for Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster's Funnyman in late 1947. He still sits at the same drawing board, some 45,000 pages on.

He uses Winsor & Newton

25¢ TRAIL OF THE GOLDEN DEATH!
FEATURING:
THE SUNDANCE KID
NO 2 JULY
YOU SAVE A GUY'S LIFE AND WIND UP TRYIN TO HANG ON TO YOUR OWN SKIN...
GUESS I SHOULD'VE TAKEN THE CURSE OF THAT TREASURE MAP MORE SERIOUSLY!
KILL HIM!--HE'S GOT QUENTIN FLOOD'S MAP!
CO-STARRING THE EXCITING BULLSEYE! AND THE DYNAMIC DURANGO KID!

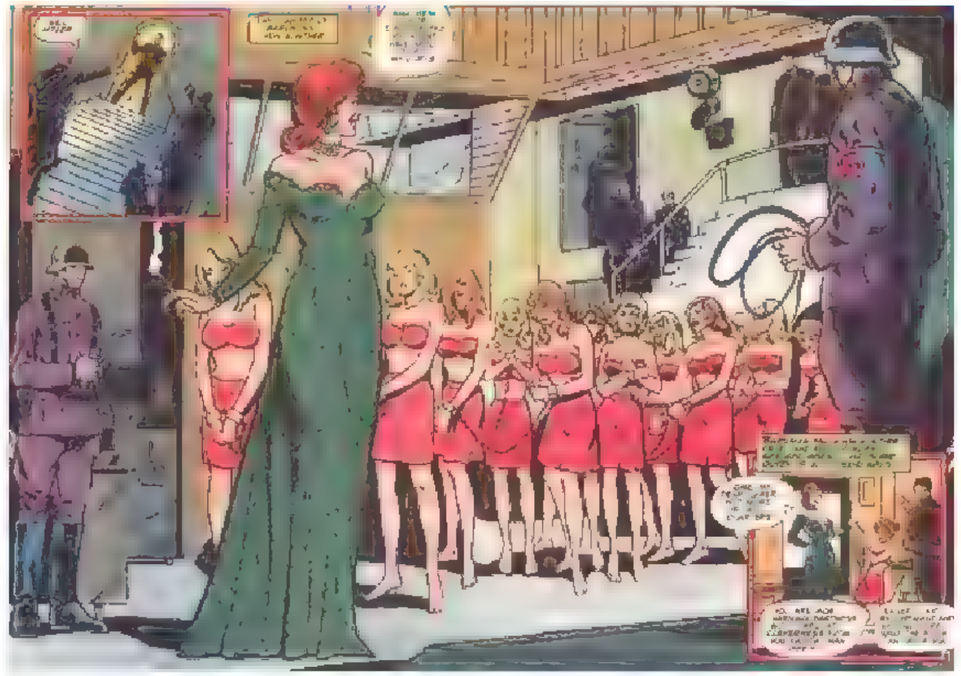

ALL WARS CHANGE THE MEN WHO FIGHT THEM. SOME MEN BECOME HEROES, SOME MEN ARE BROKEN, AND SOME MEN DEFY THE DESTINY SOCIETY HAS CHOSEN FOR THEM. ONE SUCH MAN WAS AARON HOPE...
"The DESERTER"
ARIZONA TERRITORY, 1874...
"I WAS THE FIRST TO SEE THE STRANGER WHEN HE RODE INTO TOWN AND RIGHT OFF, I KNEW HE WAS SOMETHING SPECIAL...
SHERIFF
"AS THINGS WORKED OUT, I GUESS MAYBE I WISH I'D BEEN WRONG."
GERRY CONWAY WRITER
DICK AYERS ART & LTG
MILT SHAPINN LETTERER
COLORIST
PAUL LEVITZ EDITOR

series 7 #6, 5, 4, 3, and 2 brushes according to the blurb for that inker survey site I found last time at *www.nidlink.com~dempsey/inking_survey/answers/artists/a/ayers.html* which, apart from possibly being the longest web address in internet history, wouldn't let me in due to a "missing URL". Is nothing safe from sneak thieves? But wait, later I discovered on *www.manwithoutfear.com/interviews/ddINTAyers.html* that Dick, according to an interview from March 1999, now prefers a #3 brush to a #6. This interview gives me a bit more than Bradley S. Cobb's interview on *www.mightymlj.com/interviews/ayers.html*, which tells us very little of Dick's time on the Mighty Crusaders for Archie. The excellent DD site, however elicits that Ayers moved to Timely, later Marvel of course, in 1951. He cites his first editor at Magazine Enterprises plus Stan Lee as major influences. He always worked at home and was thus "never privy to the office gossip". One regret Ayers has is never having worked with Gil Kane. He "refrains from creating". That is, he draws what's asked. In the early days of Marvel it was surely this attribute that Lee treasured most. A guy he could rely on to get the job done. And no arguments when the identity of the Green Goblin was the subject of coffee room conversation...

Of course, Ayers is probably most famous for his Western comics. AC Comics continues to print his 50s work on *Ghost Rider*, now renamed *The Haunted Horseman* in its reprint title Best of the West. Check out *www.accomics.com.*

On *www.comicsfun.com/unpub/twogun.htm* you can view an unpublished sketch of the Two Gun Kid, bought from Ayers at the Big Apple Con in March 1999. This chappie also has a Hawkeye sketch to view too.

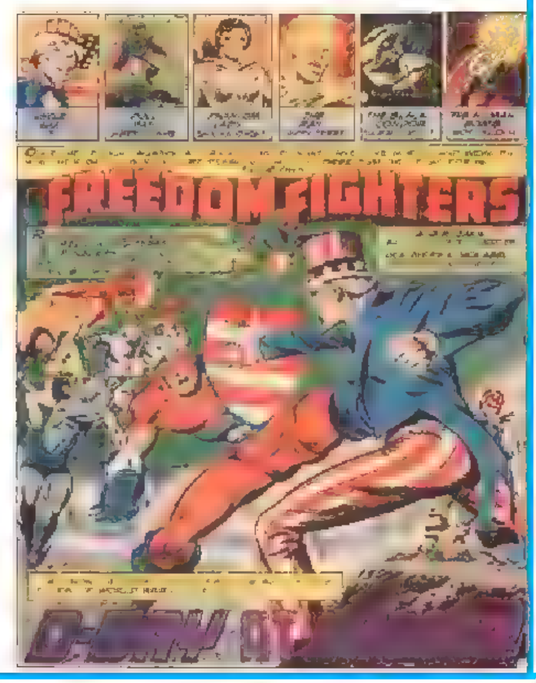
Where would we be without at least one resident web weirdo? Step forward "The Cliff Guy" on *www.thecliffguy.com*, specialising in, err... drawings featuring cliffs. DA renders a piece starring Sgt. Fury and err... a cliff. But who am I to argue? Gene Colan describes the cliff experience as "a unique perspective for a website...what an impressive collection". Cor,



would you look at the crags on that... Mind you is it our Dick who is a "charter member of the Rotary Club of Rappahannock-Fredericksburg"? Honestly the things you find on a pleasant evening's surfin'.

Lastly, you can join the Dick Ayers Mailing List on *www.interlog.com/~ditko37/ayers-l.htm*. If you're lucky you can speak to the living legend himself, along with the 67 group members who can navigate their way through this Yahoo site, a feat marginally less difficult than finding the source of the Nile from the back of a giraffe...

The greatest source of pleasure for me, however, was finding Dick's e-mail address. Oh, I won't reveal it here... it's not hard to find, I just don't want the soul to be swamped. I e-mailed him to let him know this article was being researched. And he e-mailed back. Wow! I spoke to a legend, me. Dick, if you're reading this, and I'm sure you will, you've given us guys (and gals) such entertainment over the years. We appreciate all your hard work and your enthusiasm in the great medium that is comics. Wishing you many more years of good health. Now back to the drawing board!



FROM EDDIE

EDDIE CAMPBELL has had a long and varied career in comics, beginning with British small press work in the early 1980s, notably including the first batch of his Alec stories and, via Harrier Comics, the opening sallies in the Bacchus series. Since then he's been published by American companies including Fantagraphics, Dark Horse, Kitchen Sink and DC, although he now self-publishes most of his work through the Eddie Campbell Comics imprint. Borderline's Jay Eales spoke briefly with the expatriate Briton, resident in Australia for many years, who may currently be best known as Alan Moore's collaborator on From Hell…

Borderline: Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions in comics?
Eddie Campbell: No. I would like to write a decent history of comics as I feel that all previous ones, with a couple of exceptions, are crap.
BL: Do you have any unfulfilled ambitions outside comics?
EC: I would like to write a book on art in general as the world desperately needs a new context for it. This book and the one above are probably the same book. I have many notes and half written chapters and my head is full of just what it is I need to do, but the task is enormous and I don't know where to start. I started to think about these things while drawing Alec: How To Be An Artist.

BL: Which piece of your own work are you most proud of?
EC: I would say the above named book Alec: How To Be An Artist although the one I am trying to complete next is also a formidable piece of work. It will probably be called The Snooter. [*Since this conversation, the collection has been renamed After The Snooter, and is about to see publication.*] It consists of the body of autobiographical material that I have been drawing for the last six years.

BL: What's the oddest day-job you've ever had?
EC: It just seems too long ago now to talk about my day jobs. They were all pretty ordinary, e.g. filing clerk, guillotine operator. At the most depressing part of my life, going for a job as a department store Santa but deciding against it en route as there was no way I could muster a cheery "ho ho ho".

BL: If you were able to ban one question from all future interviews, what would that question be?
EC: I would ban the *three* most frequently asked questions:
A) Where do you get your ideas?
B) How long does it take to draw a page?
C) How mad is Alan Moore?

BL: Is there a question that you've always wanted to be asked in an interview, but never have?
EC: If there was I would have found some way of working it in. I've never let the interviewer's questions stop me from saying what I wanted to say.

BL: How do you see comics changing in the next few years?
EC: I see the commercial comic as staying pretty much the same forever and ever. Every couple of years someone will bring the X-Men and Batman back to basics. On the other hand there has been a tendency for comics to receive a great deal of academic attention in recent years. Most of it is annoying and I believe detrimental to the medium in the long run. The academic consideration of comics focuses on a formalistic conception of the medium that goes way beyond common sense. Every time I hear the expression "sequential art" I want to go and hide my head under a pillow.

BL: Recommend a comic we should be reading.
EC: Jimmy Corrigan by Ware, Safe Area Gorazde by Sacco, Ghost World by Clowes, Berlin by Lutes, and the works in progress by Seth (Clyde Fans) and Chester Brown (Louis Riel).

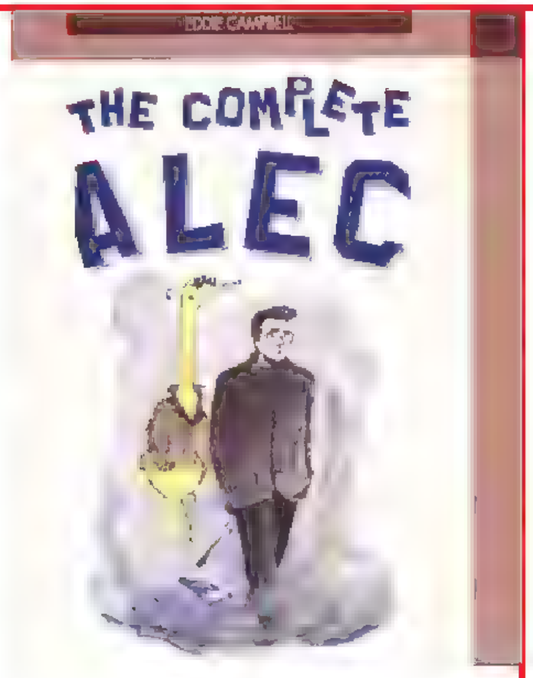
BL: Name something that is overrated.
EC: Can't think of anything. Acclaim is such a fleeting thing that I would not wish to rob anyone of it, even if undeserving.

BL:Name something that is underrated.
EC: Glenn Dakin's work. Look for his book titled Abe: Wrong For the Right Reasons by Top Shelf Prods, a collection of his '80s work.

BL: Why are you working in comics, rather than another form?
EC: What other form is there? I don't mean to be facetious, it just never occurred to me to do anything else.

BL: Is there a character or series that you wish you'd created?
EC: No. The things I've created have come from the part of me that is truly me and I'm perfectly happy and at ease with myself as I am. (Ignoring of course some dumb things I said last night when I'd had a couple of wines, but then we all do that, don't we?)

BL: Movie adaptations of comics - bad idea, or take the money and run?
EC: Tell me an easier way to make that much money.



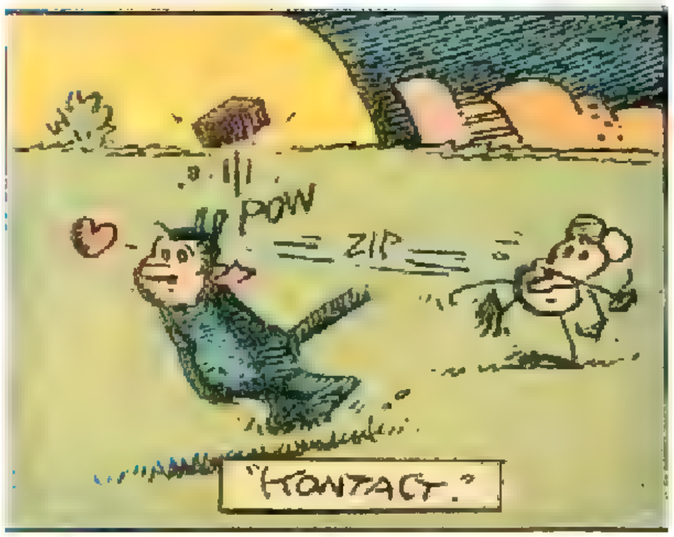
BL: Outside comics, where do your talents lie?
EC: In recent times I have come to enjoy making a public spectacle of myself giving talks and appearances. I enjoy the adrenalin rush. A live TV appearance is in the offing. I'm both terrified and excited by the proposition.

BL: Do you have anything else to declare?
EC: Four bottles of rare Spanish sherries over the duty free allowance.

I WATCHED THE WHOLE THING FROM THE PUBLIC GALLERY AND AFTERWARDS JOHN GODFREY DROPPED ME OFF HOME —
I STAND AROUND AWHILE AND THINK TO MYSELF — GREAT MYTHS BEING CREATED AT THE KING CANUTE.

IT STARTED WITH A BRICK

It was the original Itchy and Scratchy *Show, a gonzo saga of love, bricks and misunderstanding that featured one of the strangest romantic triangles ever to appear in fiction. Tom Lennon gets beaned on the brain by George Herriman's Krazy Kat.*



THERE'S nothing like a romantic triangle to bring the best out in a fictional character. When a hero is forced to choose between two competing suitors - or a protagonist competes for a lover's affection - story thrives as dilemma gives rise to choice and change. Moreover, the audience witnesses a time-honoured dramatic convention unfold, one that can be traced back to Ancient Greece and those heady days when Ares and Aphrodite snuck off to do the dirty on Hephaistos. Comics, of course, are no stranger to these sordid shenanigans: from Popeye, Olive and Bluto through to Cyclops, Phoenix and Wolverine - by way of Lois, Clark and Lana - creators have continued to utilise the romantic triangle as a source of dramatic conflict. One title, however, scaled new and dizzying heights in its exploration of this theme. Even though its last installment was originally published over half a century ago, it has continued to enchant new generations of comic fans with its breathtaking innovation, sublime beauty and peerless artistry.

George Herriman's **Krazy Kat** was published between 1913 and 1944 and featured one of the most bizarre variations of the romantic triangle ever to appear in fiction. Krazy - a saintly, "heppy go lucky" cat of simple wisdom and indeterminate gender - passionately loved Ignatz Mouse. Ignatz, though, obsessively hated Krazy, and emphasised this sentiment by throwing a brick at the "fool kat's" head on a daily basis. Krazy, however, misinterpreted these "beanings" as declarations of love - "missils of affection" from his "l'il angil" - and smiled wistfully each time one clobbered his skull. Gruff "kanine konstable" Offissa Bull Pupp, however, secretly loved Krazy and tried to protect him/her (remember, indeterminate gender) from Ignatz' violence by throwing the "li'l sinnah" into jail at every opportunity. Krazy, meanwhile, was blissfully unaware of Pupp's passion and only had eyes for Ignatz…

All of this was set against the psychedelic, perpetually morphing sands of Coconino County, a madcap landscape that was based on Herriman's beloved Monument Valley, Arizona. Coconino was a place that would drive many a modern comics fan into a state of violent apoplexy: for those who like their continuity nice, logical and watertight, it would seem like a deeply perverted vision of Hell. It was a land where the laws of physics and causality were ignored, where a house could change into a cactus plant between panels and characters would traverse the world in the space of a sentence. The language of the strip, too, was equally wild, inventive and unpredictable. Characters spoke in ethnically diverse, phonetic dialects that were shot through with the rhythmic beat of the Jazz Age. To modern sensibilities, it all sounds a little weird. The eponymous Krazy, for instance, spoke in an alliterated, stream of consciousness combination of Yiddish and Creole patois. In short, he "sounded" like the demented lovechild of James Joyce and Jar Jar Binks.

But don't let that put you off. While the words and images of **Krazy Kat** were spontaneous and surreal, these madcap improvisations were strictly aligned to Herriman's strict coordinates of compulsion. The apotheosis of this, of course, was its infamous romantic triangle.

In comics, as in other storytelling media, romantic triangles are usually resolved when a character makes a choice, gets chosen or winds up being rejected. Even superhero comic strips - notorious for their avoidance of meaningful closure - obey this principle. When the Invisible Girl finds herself torn between the dependable-but-dull Reed Richards and the fanciable-but-fishy Sub-Mariner, we know she'll ultimately have to choose between the two. Granted, the outcome might be so predictable that a glass eye up a horse's arse could see it coming - and the dilemma might reoccur time and time again - but at least we know she has a choice. With **Krazy Kat**, though, things were significantly different.

For one thing, the situation couldn't be resolved. Closure wasn't built into the design. The triangle was constructed like an emotional Hofstadter Strange Loop, and the characters were, quite literally, forced to repeat themselves. In this sense, the romantic triangle transcended the status of narrative device. It became the fundamental essence of the strip, its raison d'etre. Just as jazz musicians structure their improvisations around repeated chord progressions, Herriman anchored his own wild dance of word and image to the central dynamic of the triangle, creating thousands of strips that explored the endless permutations of this bizarre yet deeply ironic set-up.

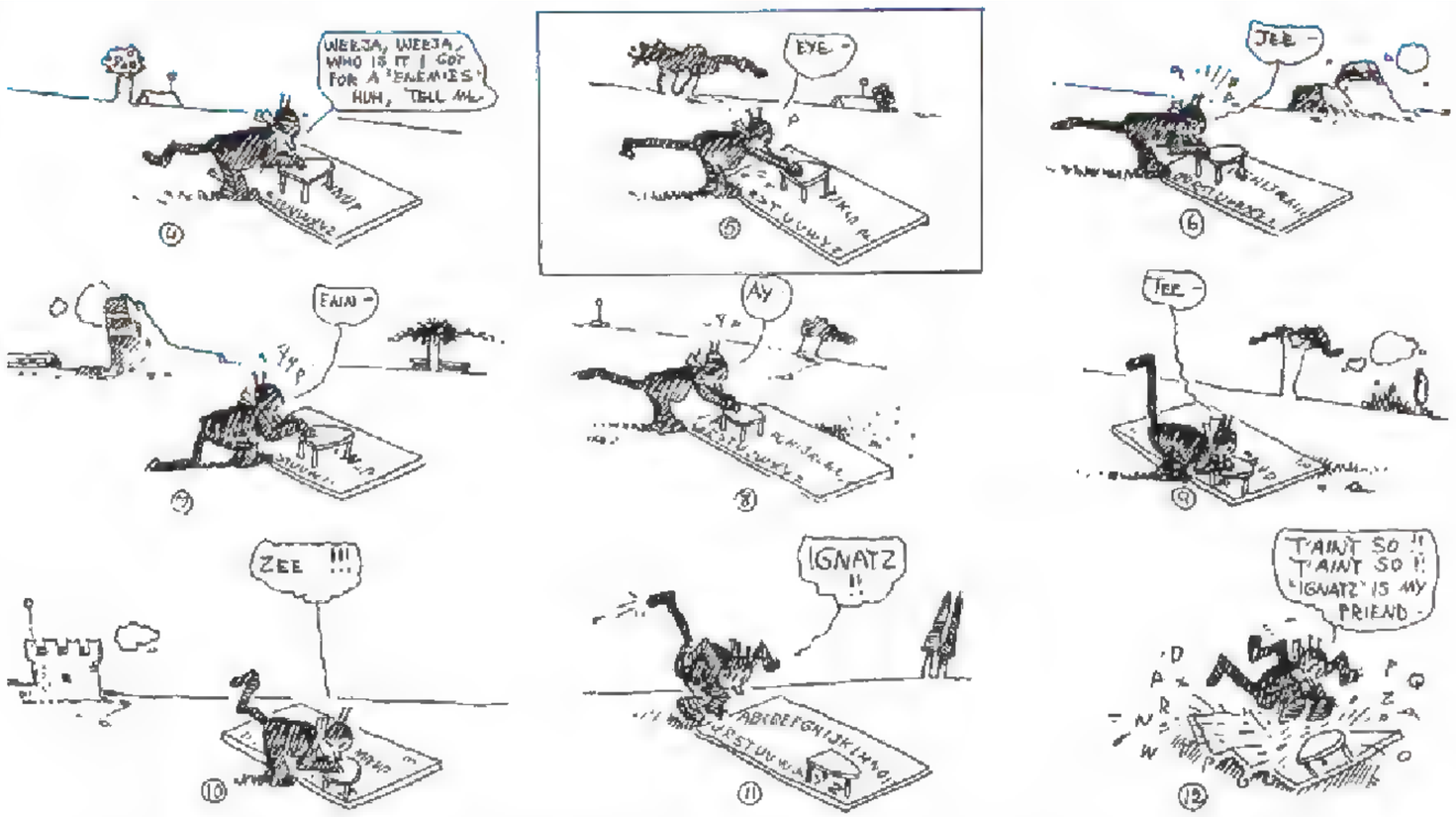
The elaborate cat-mouse-dog triangle was not fully formed at the strip's inception, however, but

KHOO!
COMES TO COCONINO AND COMMENCES TO TEACH FOLKS LEARNING AND EDUCATION — THAT MIMI —
WHAT WE NEED ARE THE ESTHETICS OF THE INNER EXPRESSIONS - DANCE
RHYTHM
HERRIMAN

was something that developed organically over time. As Herriman himself once admitted, "**Krazy Kat** was not conceived, not born, it jes' grew," and the characters' first appearance was inauspicious to say the least. In 1910 he was illustrating a daily sit-com strip for the *New York Evening Journal* entitled **The Dingbat Family**. Along the bottom of the July 26 1910 installment - and done, according to Herriman, just "to fill up the wasted space" - a mouse sneaked up on the family cat and threw a projectile at its head. This throwaway gag turned out to be the catalyst - or, ahem, *katalyst* - for all that followed. After a month or so of these daily beatings, Herriman introduced us to the next, ironic layer: as Ignatz slept, Krazy crept up to the mouse and planted a big sloppy kiss on his brow. The straightforward slapstick and comic role-reversal of the first movement had now evolved into something more complex and sublime. Ignatz' brick - a symbol of his obsessive hatred for Krazy - would now be interpreted by the Kat as a signifier of love. For Krazy, each "beaning" would become a declaration of desire, a meaningful bouquet of brick.

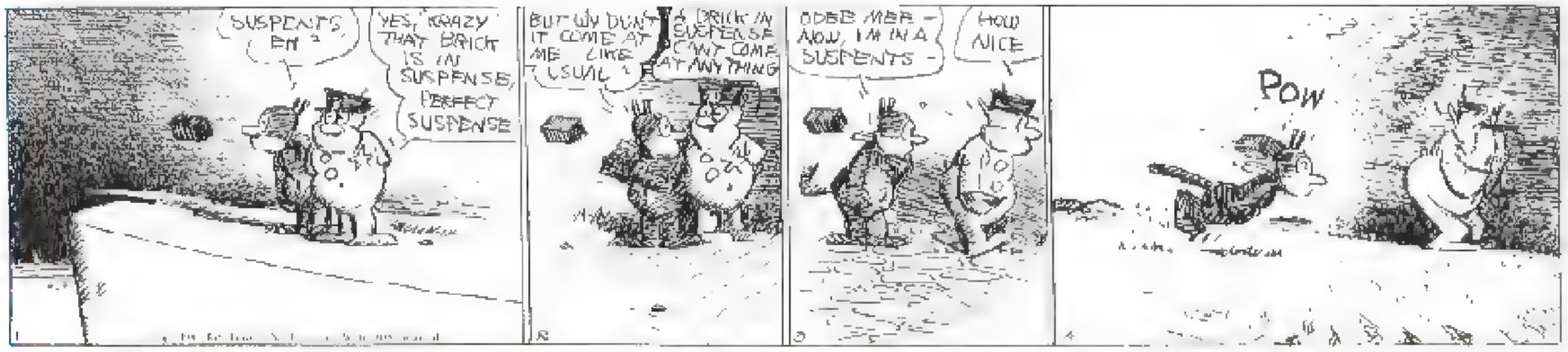
Krazy and Ignatz' adventures continued to appear in a sequence of "micro-panels" running below the **Dingbat Family** strip until they finally gained a daily strip of their own in 1913. When **Krazy Kat** subsequently gained a weekly Sunday page in 1916, Herriman's artistry took a giant leap forward. Freed from the five-panel straitjacket of "the dailies", he now had the leverage to create more innovative layouts. In terms of panel composition alone these pages were design classics. Herriman was experimenting with the way the shape, size and texture of a panel could effect the mood and overall "timing" of the strip before Frank Miller was born and while Will Eisner was still in diapers. Herriman's linework had also evolved, as he effortlessly switched between the use of a few scratchy, perfectly delivered lines to capture the image and essence of Krazy and Ignatz, and the delicate, cross-hatched chiaroscuro of the Coconino backdrop.

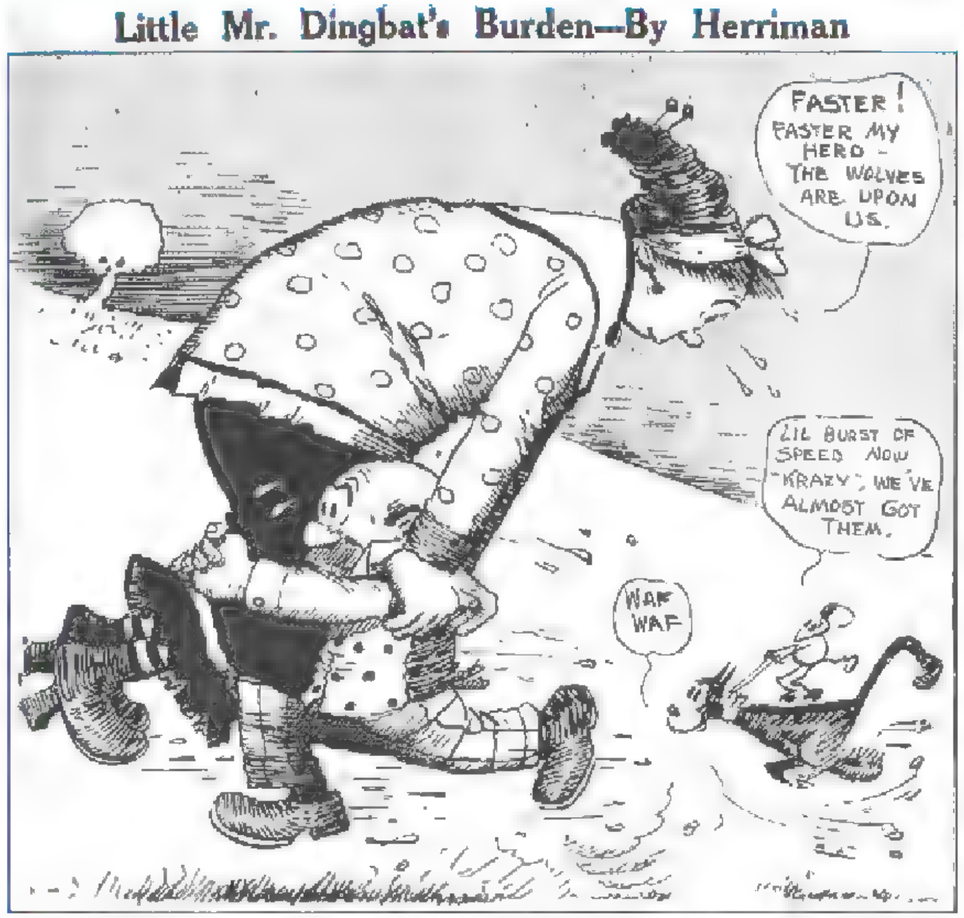
Herriman used the early Sunday pages to tell more elaborate Krazy-Ignatz gags. In a strip dated 17th June 1917, for instance, Krazy discovered a ouija Board and



asked it: "Weeja, Weeja, who is it I got for a 'enemies'?" When the planchette spelt out I-G-N-A-T-Z, Krazy smashed the board and cried "T'aint so!! T'aint so!! 'Ignatz' is my friend!" When Ignatz subsequently discovered the broken board he threw a brick at Krazy's head as punishment. To Krazy, of course, this act was proof that the Ouija Board lied. Herriman also used the Sundays to tell "how and why" yarns not dissimilar to Kipling's **Just So Stories**, providing imaginative answers to age old questions like "How did the rattlesnake get its rattle?", "Why are cats afraid of water?" and "How did mice lose their fur?"

The Sunday pages let Herriman expand on his cast of supporting characters. During this period, Coconino County's array of anthropomorphic regulars incorporated Kolin Kelly ("Dealer in Bricks"); Bum Bill Bee ("Pilgrim on the Road to Nowhere"); Joe Stork ("Purveyor of progeny to prince and proletariat") and Joe Bark ("The Moon Hater"). Herriman also resurrected characters from earlier, less successful strips like Don Kiyote ("Psalmsinger of the Desierto Pintado") and Gooseberry Sprigg ("The Duck Duke"). Together, these characters provided both an amusing commentary and an apt counterpoint to the Krazy-Ignatz relationship. One supporting character, though, was destined to serve a more significant role than this. In 1925, a new layout was imposed on **Krazy Kat**'s Sunday pages and Herriman was forced to work within a strict, standardised grid of panels. While the artist was naturally frustrated by this imposition - which prevented him


SUSPENTS ? EH ?
YES, KRAZY THAT BRICK IS IN SUSPENSE PERFECT SUSPENSE
BUT WY DUNT IT COME AT ME LIKE USUAL ?
A BRICK IN SUSPENSE CANT COME AT ANYTHING
OOBEE MEE - NOW, I'M IN A SUSPENTS -
HOW NICE
POW

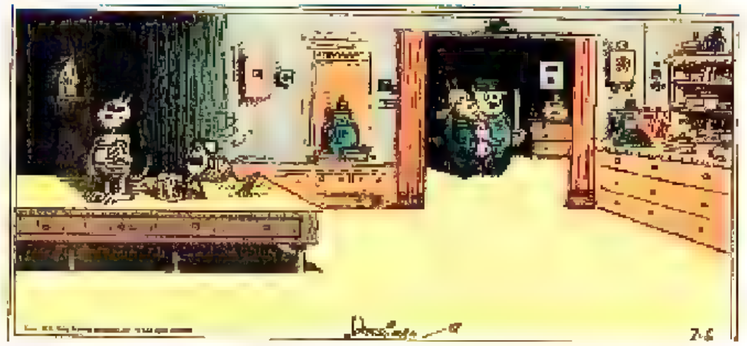

Little Mr. Dingbat's Burden—By Herriman
FASTER! FASTER MY HERO - THE WOLVES ARE UPON US.
LIL BURST OF SPEED NOW KRAZY - WE'VE ALMOST GOT THEM.
WAF WAF

from continuing his bold, visual innovations - it forced him to shift the strip's focus towards characterisation. And that's when Offissa Bull Pupp entered the fray.

Bull Pupp had been a minor supporting character since the strip's earliest days, but a private declaration of love for Krazy pushed him to the foreground: "Oh, would that I were a klown instead of a kop, oh, would that my forte be komedy instead of konstabulary - that I might bring a smile to that wan, wasted, wistful pan of that dear kat." With those words, the dynamic of the strip had evolved once more. Another rich layer of irony was added as Krazy and Ignatz's obsessive dialectic of misinterpretation mutated into an equally obsessive romantic triangle. Now 'the kat who loves the mouse who hates the kat' had become 'the dog who hates the mouse and loves the kat who loves the mouse that hates the kat.' To the repeated strum of Ignatz "beaning" Krazy with a brick a new note was added: the discordant clang of Pupp throwing Ignatz into jail.

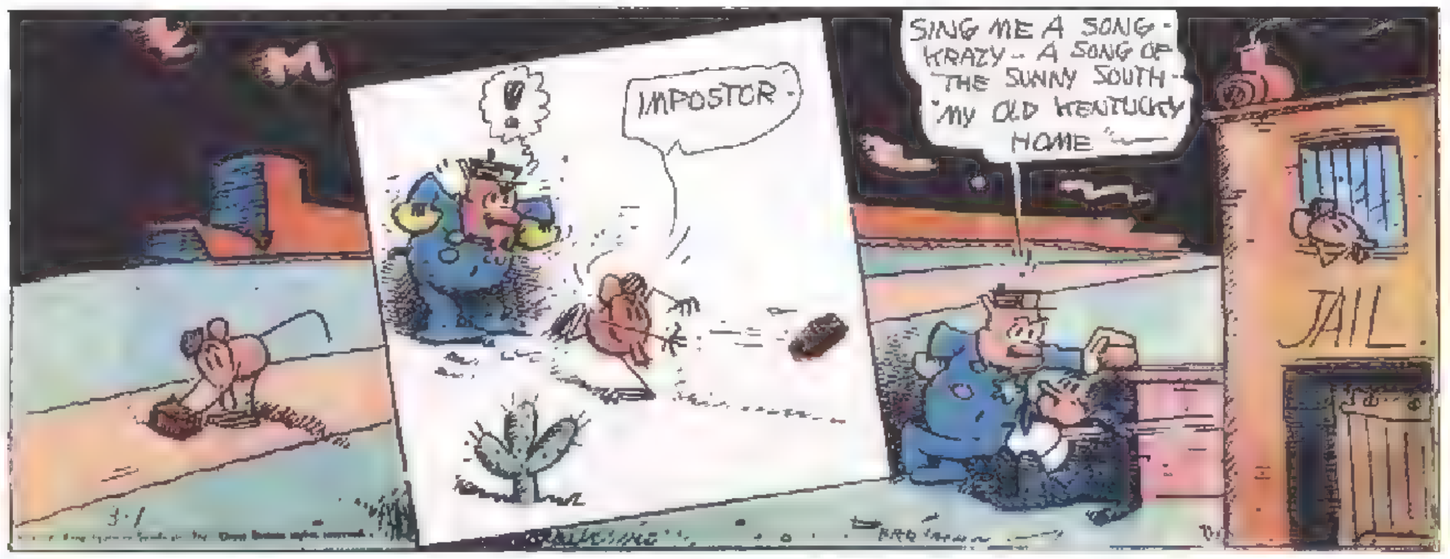
The emphasis on this strange relationship was underscored by the "stripped-down" approach to **Krazy Kat**'s art that Herriman was now adopting. The linework had become more scratchy and spontaneous. The Coconino backdrop was gradually relieved of its shops, country houses and other tokens of minor urbanity and the action increasingly took place out on the sands of this morphing, dream-like landscape. The characters, too, underwent a change. As the emotional stakes were raised, so too was the intensity of their compulsions. Ignatz, for instance, became even more obsessive in his schemes, with each throw of the brick becoming more elaborate than the last.

The next stage in the evolution of the Krazy-Ignatz-Pupp triangle coincided with another change on the production value front, namely, the introduction of colour to the Sunday strip in 1935. Unlike the imposition of the standardised grid, this was a change that Herriman embraced wholeheartedly. He used a full, bold palette to transform Coconino into a phosphorescent, psychedelic landscape encased in large, geometric panels. A purple cactus plant would grow from the green sands beneath the shadow of a ruby red mesa. In the next panel, of course, the objects - and now their colours - would all change again. His line work, too, had come a long way from the delicate cross-hatching of the early **Krazy Kat** strips, as Herriman used a bold, deeper line to contain the colour.



Krazy, Ignatz and Pupp also underwent a visual change. They became chunkier, more stylised and further removed from their humble animal origins (in one strip a supporting character had to remind them of their "atavism"). Significantly, the cast was whittled down to just Krazy, Ignatz and Pupp, with only a few "extras" now allowed out to play. The language of the strip also evolved. The lengthy, poetic rambling that had once characterised the dialogue now gave way to a tight, haiku-like minimalism. The strip was still rich in humour, of course, but the slapstick and burlesque of the early years had now given way to a subtle, slow-burn comedy: a knowing phrase or sideways glance was now enough to deliver a more subtle kind of meaning. These were jokes without punchlines and prefigured the kind of surreal comedy of repetition that popular taste is now more accustomed to.

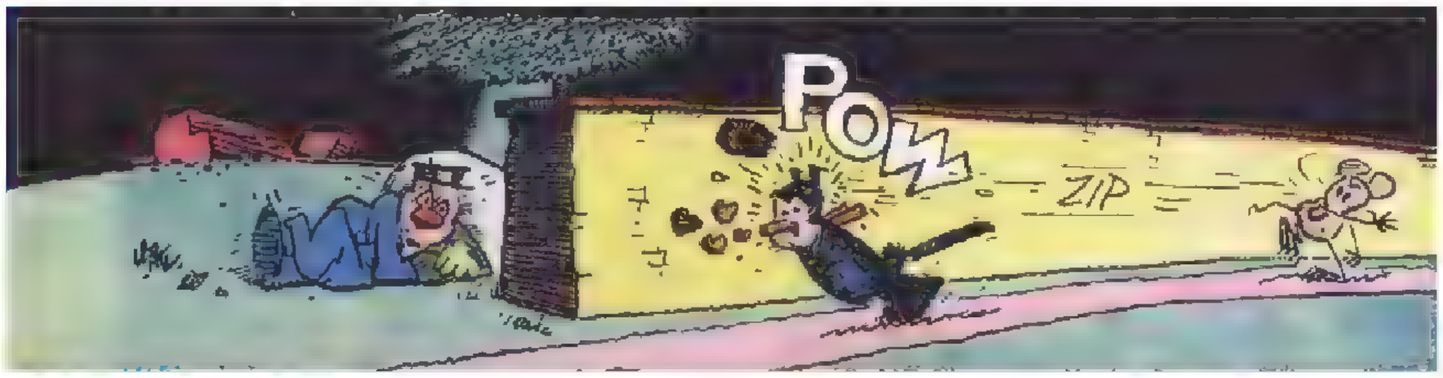
At the heart of the strip's increasingly esoteric humour, however, remained the romantic triangle. This had transcended the status of mere narrative device. It was no longer just an aspect of the strip: **Krazy Kat** *was* its romantic triangle. The gags only worked if the audience understood the inherent matrix of misinterpretation. The strip only made sense to those who could grasp that a brick to the head can mean different things to different people. In a daily strip from



1939, for instance, Offissa Pupp witnessed Ignatz beaning Krazy with a brick and said: "Transgression!!!" In panel two, Pupp reached out to grab Ignatz: "Apprehension!" In panel three, Pupp hauls Ignatz off to jail: "Retribution!" On the final panel, they reach an incomplete drawing of the jail. "Finish it!!!" demands Pupp, looking straight out of the panel at an imaginary Herriman, "Y'got kartoonists kramp?" Not for the first time in Krazy Kat's history, post-modernism predated the term.

The stripped-down, cerebral subtlety of latter-era **Krazy Kat** hardly endeared it to new readers, however. By the time Herriman died in 1944 it was only appearing in thirty-five newspapers, a minuscule number when compared to other syndicated strips of the era. What **Krazy Kat** lacked in popular success, however, it made up for in critical acclaim. Amongst its admirers were some of the artistic figureheads of the last century, including Picasso, James Joyce, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Jack Kerouac. The strip's longevity - and survival during lean periods - was due to the unlikely patronage of that most monolithic of media barons, William Randolph Hearst. After Herriman's death, Hearst took the unprecedented step of cancelling the strip. **Krazy Kat** had become so synonymous with Herriman that a replacement was out of the question.

In the decades that followed, its reputation has continued to grow. Last year, the esteemed *The Comics Journal* declared that **Krazy Kat** was the most significant comic strip of all time. Contemporary fans include Quentin Tarantino (whose *Pulp Fiction* featured Samuel L. Jackson in a Krazy Kat t-shirt) and REM's Michael Stipe (who sports a Krazy and Ignatz tattoo on his arm), while *The Simpsons*' "Itchy and Scratchy" running gag is cartoonist Matt Groening's thinly veiled homage to the strip. Its lasting appeal is due to the fact that - unlike many other vintage comic strips - it doesn't seem dated. There's a rhythm to **Krazy Kat** that remains timeless and universal. Sure, you might not notice it at first, but listen close and you'll hear it. Out beyond those morphing backdrops and that crazy, improvised language there's a noise that's familiar to us all. If you've ever found yourself caught up in a romantic triangle or endured the linear misery of unrequited love, it's a sound you're bound to recognise: it's that unmistakable THWACK of a brick to the back of the head.



FANTASTIC THREES:

COMICS' TEN GREATEST ROMANTIC TRIANGLES

1 Krazy Kat
Kat, mouse, dog, brick. *See main feature.*

2 Superman
He survives the destruction of Planet Krypton. He earns himself the title of Earth's greatest superhero. He even manages to become a journalist and maintain his integrity. In his dealings with women, however, Clark Kent experiences nothing but grief. For one thing, the object of his affections – Lois Lane – fancies his alter-ego, Superman. When he isn't being cuckolded by himself, The Man of Steel is forced to choose between the feisty Lois and his childhood sweetheart Lana Lang. It's that classic irreconcilable dilemma of big-town Power Bob vs small-town "Ginga". No wonder the poor lad wears a triangle on his chest.

3 The Fantastic Four
Reed, Sue, Ben & Johnny... they're more than just a super-team, they're a super-family. Together they explore the galaxy, discover parallel dimensions and save the world from cosmic threats. Despite all this, however, there's trouble in paradise. Over the years – and with alarming regularity - The Invisible Girl finds herself tempted by the prospect of an extra-marital backstroke with the Prince of Atlantis. Imperious Wrecks, it seems.

4 The Avengers
Earth's Mightiest Heroes? Earth's Mightiest Cuckolds, more like. Avengers' Mansion is a veritable hotbed of irreconcilable lust. It's almost de rigueur for every – ahem - *active member* to become emotionally entangled with at least two other teammates. Borderline's favourite Avengers' triangles include The Vision-Scarlet Witch-Wonder Man, The Vision-Mantis-Swordsman and Hank Pym-The Wasp-Hawkeye. Our least favourite? Well, they were probably stretching the concept a bit with Hawkeye, The Black Widow and The Communist Party of Russia. It's all a titanic triangular tapestry of Pythagorean proportions, as Stan Lee might have said. If we'd let him.

5 Spider-Man
Gwen Stacy. Peter Parker. Mary-Jane. Can we talk about this without mentioning "tangled webs"? Thought not.

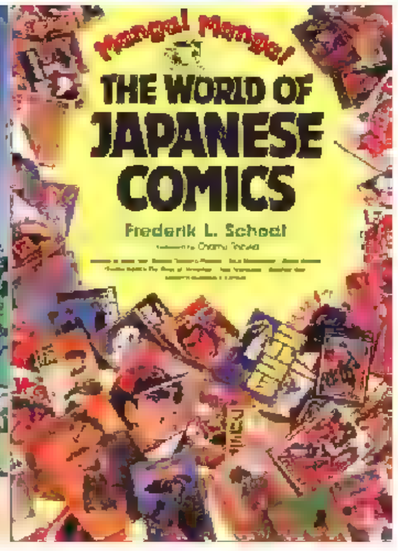
6 Wonder Woman
One of the more nutso variants: the late, great, Bob Kanigher wouldn't settle for anything as mundane as a standard romantic triangle. No sir-ree. He threw the Amazon Princess into a bona-fide love parallelogram. During the Silver Age, WW was forced to choose between Steve Trevor, Manno the Merman and – ahem – Bird-Man. And then there was Amoeba-Man...You think we're kidding, don't you?

7 The X-Men
Children of the atom, students of Charles Xavier, MUTANTS – feared and hated by the world they have sworn to protect. Also, if truth be told, SCREWED-UP by the veritable plethora of ROMANTIC TRIANGLES they're forced to endure. Whether it's Scott, Jean and Wolverine or Scott, Jean and Angel, one thing's for certain: pity poor Cyclops.

8 Watchmen
No seminal deconstruction of the superhero genre would be complete without a radical reinvention of the romantic triangle. The foxy lovechild of a crazed right-wing nut has to choose between a blue, omnipotent exhibitionist and a fat, middle-aged ornithologist. Guess what? She goes for the latter.

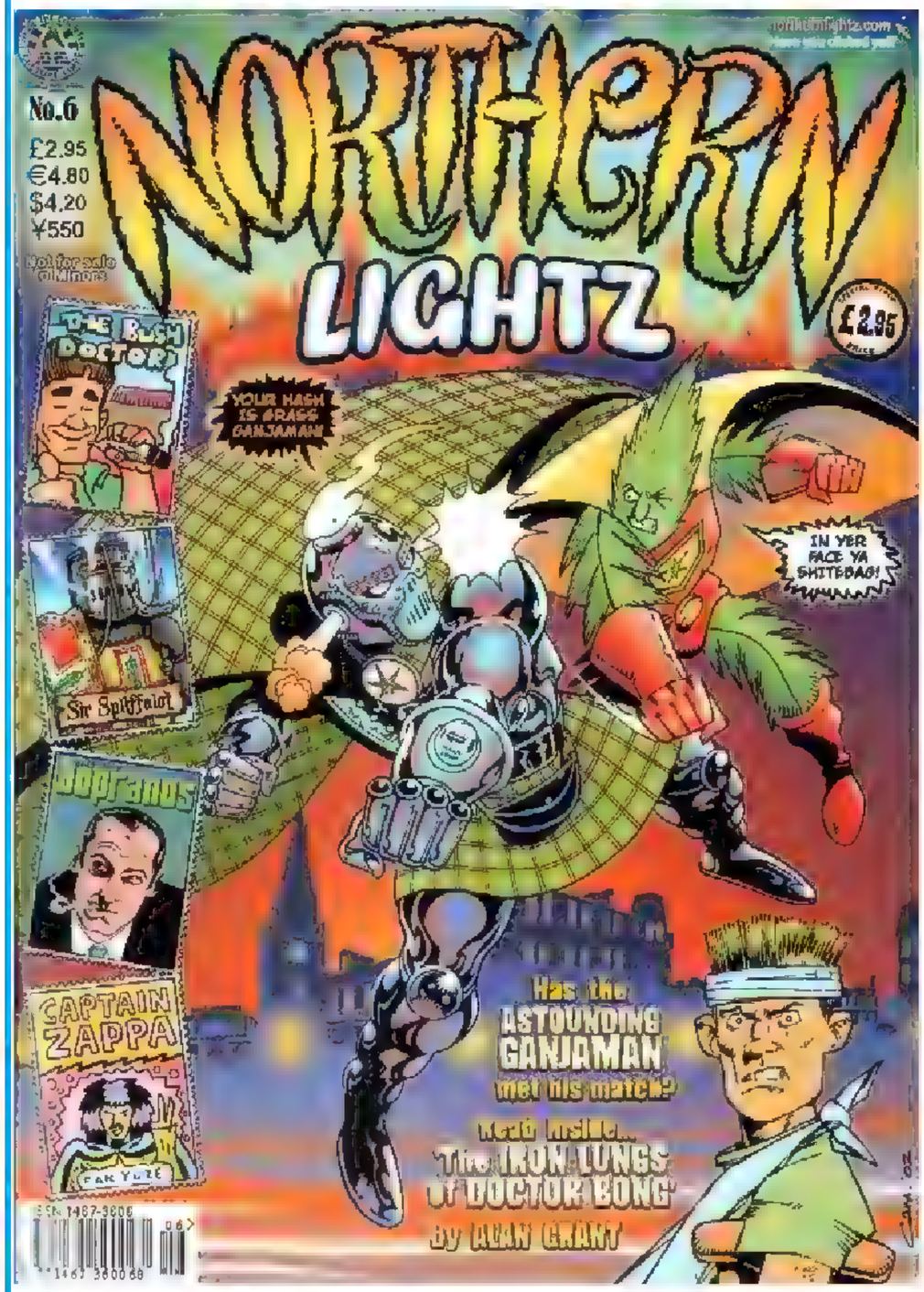
9 Archie
Rich bitch brunette Veronica loves Archie. Blonde girl-next-door Betty loves Archie. Archie adores both of them - and every other pretty girl he sees. The Archie stories plunder the Sherwood Anderson/ J.D. Salinger Small Town American Dream mythos to present a hopeless geek as "golden boy" and comfort comics readers everywhere; if this nerd can have two gorgeous girls chasing him, then there's hope even for us.

10 Every single f******g Manga comic ever.



LIGHTING UP

In the first of what might be an occasional series on Underground comics, Mike Sivier *starts at the end. Northern Lightz sprang into the comicbook firmament in 1999 - but you'd be hard pressed to find it in a comic shop. Here's how it works...*



CAST your mind back to the spring of 1999, Glasgow, Scotland. Not the likeliest birthplace for a British comicbook success story, you may think. You'd be wrong. That spring, a number of like-minded individuals - all with prior experience of making comics - realised they were working together on a new underground comic. How would it pay its production costs? Glad you asked. The money comes from advertising placed by the flourishing hydroponic and head shops, throughout what might loosely be labelled the UK's "underground scene".

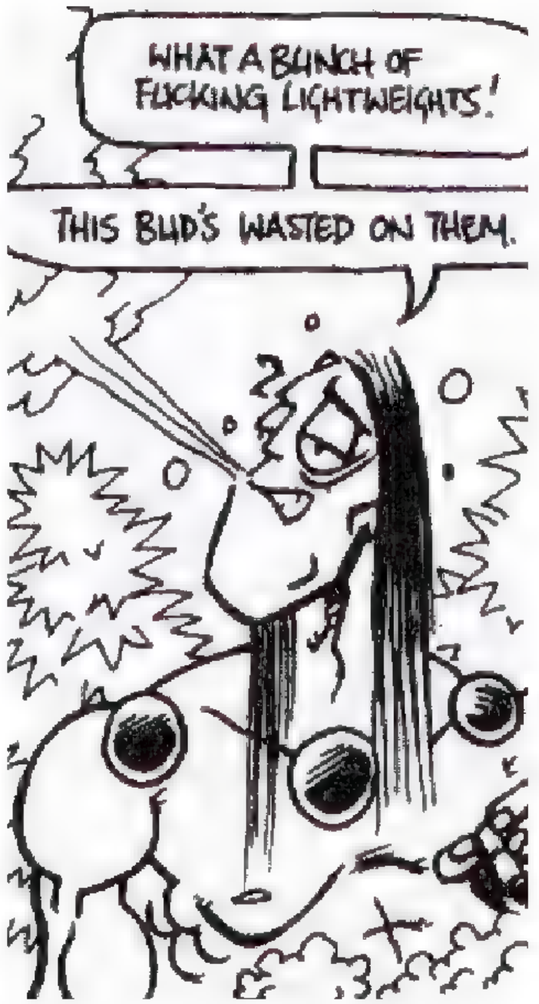
Jamie Grant, **Lightz**' head honcho, explains: "The comic would be sold through the same outlets - either direct from the manufacturers - us - or in bulk through a number of independent wholesalers - them. Y'know - those folk who supply all the tat to the hippy shops."

Not necessarily as a result of this, there's a strong running theme in favour of a certain recreational substance. Can you guess what that might be? I'll give you a hint: The lead strip is called *Buck Roachers in the Plenty Spliff Century*. It has a superhero called *Ganjaman*. You get the idea.

With the cash needed to actually realise the comic secured, the pages began to come in - all in black and white. "The cover already existed as a poster by Dave Alexander, so we all had a 'figurehead' to actively imagine while we worked on material," says Jamie. This is still the case today: "Every issue really doesn't 'happen' or come together until the cover's realised. Our first issue was published in August of 1999, Dave Alexander played the straight man, and since then we've never looked back."

Under what influences did the comic begin? Jamie illuminates: "Three of our artists on the **Lightz**, Dave Alexander, Shug McKenna and Frank Quitely, were all stalwart contributors to the venerable Scottish humour magazine ***Electric Soup***, published by John Brown in the early 90s. ***Northern Lightz*** is the natural descendant evolved from that earlier magazine," he says. "This is especially true with our average panel-per-page count, which can be from 11 to 18 panels a page."

As for influences on the style of the magazine, the roots of ***Northern Lightz*** are on show for all to see: "Oh, I think the American 60s/70s/80s Underground comics by Robert Crumb, Dave Sheridan, Gilbert Shelton, Paul Mavrides, fill in



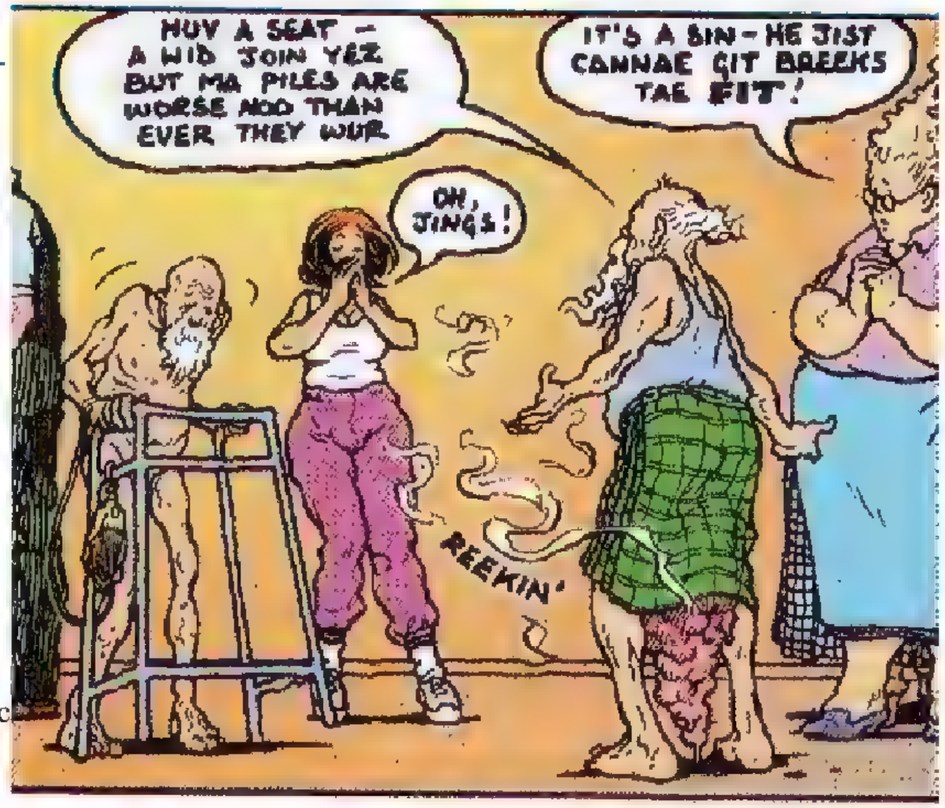
your favourite cult underground artist *here*, are very much a main influence because that stuff is *so* visual and graphic - who needs to film it?"

So who were - or are - the behind-the-scenes heroes? Jamie has a word of advice for all aspiring publishers: "Don't be a hero...! It's a team effort all the way," he says. "Everyone

involved contributes according to their means, gifts, and time. It runs on fun! More contributors appear all the time," he adds. "You got your comicbooks and you've got your armies. You want to turn a comicbook into an army. This is what you get."

Having recognized the ***Lightz*** Underground origins, it can be seen how some of the influences are writ large in the strips. For example, from the lead *Buck Roachers in the Plenty Spliff Century* through to *Ganjaman* and the plethora of parodies of classic films, novels, or even comic strips, there is a certain attitude towards the portrayal of women - and it's worth calling Jamie on it. Without wanting to make ***Northern Lightz*** - or Underground comics in general - look sexist: Women. Are they all sex-mad or what?

His answer is direct and to the point: "Just be thankful that the human female is such a sexy creature. Without them being in a constant state of heat and able to pop babies all season, there wouldn't be so many people - and definitely no comic marketplace to speak of either."


NUV A SEAT – A WID JOIN YEZ BUT MA PILES ARE WORSE NOO THAN EVER THEY WUR
IT'S A SIN – HE JIST CANNAE GIT BREEKS TAE FIT!
OH, JINGS!
REEKIN'

Okay then, how about politics? Looking at ***Northern Lightz*** #1's *Bud Roach* strip, in which he crusades to bring a big bag o' blow to the harassed ecological commandos (E-commandos. You read it *there* first), there seems to be a vein of eco-sensitivity there. Is this a priority of the magazine? Do the Knightz of the Lightz ally themselves with political issues (apart from the obvious one)?

"There's no political agenda," Jamie vows. "The comic is simple light entertainment for mature readers of the immature variety. Anyway - politicians are all the same. No matter who you vote for - a politician *always* gets in."

Northern Lightz is chock-full of parodies - *Spliff Warz* parodies a certain well-known SF film, *Thunderbuds* pulls the strings of the cult Gerry Anderson marionettes, *Buff the Vamp Layer* hits on the current TV vampire-slaying sensation. Why? Is it a pop culture thing? Does ***Lightz*** use recognised icons to fuel its own agendas, are they simply frames to hang jokes from, or did the creators just feel like it at the time?

The answer? It's easily recognisable shorthand. "People already recognise most parodies," says Jamie. "We hope they do, anyway. So it's easier to fit a story about them into one or two pages. Again, there is no agenda. What people come up with is pretty much what we put in each issue. It's just the way it turns out."

All right, then: *The Mad Mental McBams* - for some reason I keep associating them with Gilbert Shelton's *Freak Brothers*. Should I? Or should I be seeking mental help? "The FFF Bros might be distant American cousins of the MacBams," Jamie replies cryptically. "Who knows?"

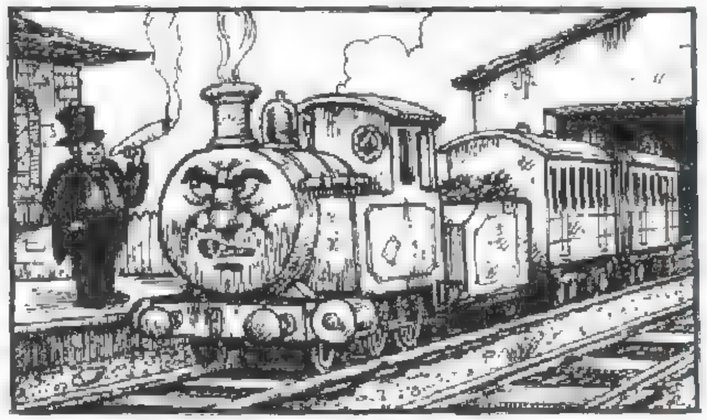
One of the highlightz of ***Northern Lightz***, to this reader, is the way creators like Dave Alexander and Jamie himself seem to enjoy experimenting with different comics styles, ranging from *Rupert the Bear*, where there are no captions or speech balloons obstructing the art, and the action is explained in a paragraph below the picture, through to a sort of "British action comics" style, with strips like *The Wrecked Baron* (***Lightz*** #2) having taglines above each page: "The greasy green baron gets high in the sky!" And, of course, there are strips resembling the original US Undergrounds. What was the thinking behind that?

"It definitely helps to look at the whole package when creating a feel for the theme," says Jamie. "There're many layout styles to express a story. We're still having fun rediscovering them."

You can rediscover them too, if you send something like £3.95 (inc. postage and packing) to: Northern Lightz Publishing, PO Box 25285, Glasgow, G2 6WD, Scotland, United Kingdom. The next issue should be out right around the same time as ***Borderline*** - and it's in *colour*.

You can even check out some of the strips on the web at *http://www.northernlightz.com*.

THOMAS the TANKED ENGINE and Enemies



Tam the Tanked Engine was in a very bad mood! The Fat Coneroller had just told him that a new electric powered loco called Algernon would soon be sharing Tam's shed and would be taking over his duties. "That's not fuckin' on!' rasped Tam, "I've worked this line for forty years - and I can work it for another fuckn forty!"

THE STAROS REPORT

AUTHOR of The Staros Report, *one half of publisher Top Shelf Productions and an Eisner nominated writer in his own right, for nearly eight years now Chris Staros has been quietly working to bring the best comics to as wide a readership as possible. At the recent Comics 2002 festival in Bristol, UK, Chris took some time out to chat with Borderline's Rob Cave.*

THE TOP SHELF INTERVIEW

Borderline: I guess the first question that needs to be asked of any small publisher is, why do you exist; what can you offer us that the bigger publishers can't?
Chris Staros: Well, publishers like ourselves at Top Shelf work hard at breaking new talent; we are like a farm house for the big leagues. Our niche market are readers who come to us looking for the kind of different, cutting edge material that the mainstream does not currently carry. It's easier for us to break new ground with the kind of stuff that we are doing. In our flagship anthology title, Top Shelf, we publish a lot of short stories by up-and-comers, newer creators, and as they develop we give them showcases in bigger books and graphic novels. We are more a ground-floor-up kind of publisher rather than the bigger comics companies, which are more top-down. We just provide a different kind of book to the industry. For people who are looking to read something new and something different - that's what we are here for.

BL: Besides being one half of Top Shelf, you also act as American agent for Eddie (From Hell) Campbell and Gary (Strangehaven) Spencer Millidge. How do you strike the balance between your work as a publisher and as an agent?
CS: Well, when I started in the comics business myself, I started with a fanzine called *The Staros Report*, which was a review magazine about comics. Through that I ended up getting to know Eddie Campbell and Gary Spencer Millidge and became friends with them. Because they were both based in the UK at the time and wanted to do a lot of business in the US market, I offered my services. Eventually they took me up on that offer and I sort of became an agent for them.

I've been representing them for about 8 years now. Through self publishing *The Staros Report* and being an agent I really began to understand the whole mechanism of the comics publishing industry. About 5-6 years ago I went into partnership with my friend, Brett Warnock who founded Top Shelf Productions, and we formed fully as a corporation, the whole 9 yards. We both understood how the industry worked and wanted to make great comics. So, I have no problem doing both, we keep a set of books for Top Shelf and a set of books for our clients.

Staros, wife and Eddie Campbell in reverse order

BL: What sort of comics do you like?
CS: Well, that was the exact question that prompted me to start writing *The Staros Report* to begin with. A lot of the time when people would ask me that on the spot I'd find it hard to come up with a comprehensive list, remembering all the little things besides Love and Rockets and Maus and Dan Clowes' stuff and all the obviously great comics out there. So, I started making detailed notes for *The Staros Report*s. My answer to that question is *The Staros Report* '96-97. Because I spent two years of my life detailing what books I liked and what comics I thought were the best. The plan all along was to continue publishing *The Staros Report*, but publishing other people's stuff is taking up so much of my time now that I doubt it will get done. I know what it would look like, I know what books I'd want to cover, I've been keeping a list of all the titles, there are about 200 in total, but I'm just out of time. Because Top Shelf has made commitments to so many great cartoonists to put their stuff on the shelves I literally have to put their priorities ahead of my own. I've made a promise to these people, and I want to keep that promise.

BL: It's now been well over a year since Top Shelf switched to full returnability on your comics (enabling speciality comic shops to return unsold copies of comics that have not sold to their publisher for a refund) - *how has that decision affected your business?*
CS: Actually, returnability is not something that has affected us at Top Shelf a great deal. Where it does have an impact is with the retailer. Full returnability takes the risk out of stocking our books for the retailer, since they can always return any stock that they cannot sell. In comics, the retailer really takes all the risks, so if we can do anything to make it easier for retailers to turn a profit from our comics, we will do it.

BL: Where Top Shelf really hit the headlines of the comics press this year was as part of the fallout from book distributor LPC going to the wall and eventually being saved by the fans. Can you tell me a little about that?
CS: Top Shelf was really saved through the comics community and the power of the Internet. I can't thank people like Warren Ellis and all the people on the WEF *(Warren Ellis Forum)* enough. Not only did they help spread the word of Top Shelf's plight, and keep talking about our books, but they also followed through and bought copies of our books directly from us, enabling us to continue. A lot of them were aware of what we'd been doing at Top Shelf, but they hadn't got round to actually picking up one of our books. Thanks to places like the WEF hyping our best books, stuff like Goodbye Chunky Rice, Pistol Whip, From Hell, Eddie Campbell's and Gary Spencer Millidge's stuff, we are able to carry on publishing.

BL: How do you see the power of the Internet affecting how you sell your comics in the future?
CS: When it comes to buying comics I'm still very "old school". I like going into bookstores. I really appreciate all of the Top Shelf readers who helped us out of a hole, but I kind of still want comics buyers to get their stuff through the retailers where they can. The strength of a publisher is his distribution and retail network. 3000 locations around the world where people can come across your book are clearly better than having one location of sale on a website. So we are still committed to selling our books through book and comic stores.

BL: How do you feel what happened with LPC will affect you in the future?
CS: Once we find a new distributor and get our book trade sales back again, then I'll start to breathe a lot easier. Ultimately, the work that LPC did to help bring graphic novels to the book trade will help us with our new distributor, and hopefully things will keep on improving for us in that direction. The better graphic novels do in the book trade, the better for all of us, as this will bring comics to a much wider audience.

BL: What was your reaction when CrossGen bought $5000 worth of your comics and donated them to libraries?
CS: I was so grateful. In fact, at the WizardWorld Chicago convention just a couple weeks ago, I finally got to thank Mark Alessi in person for the first time. What CrossGen did for us not only saved Top Shelf and made the industry realize what a team player CrossGen was, but the publicity generated by having us donate books to public libraries really helped fuel more interest in all graphic novels in the library systems. And that was the genius in their generosity.

BL: Coming back to you for a moment, what was your reaction when you received an Eisner nomination?
CS: Simply, amazement. *The Willful Death of a Stereotype (published in Expo 2001, the Small Press Expo book)* was an extremely important story for me, personally, but I had no idea that others would like it so much. I'm really honoured to be in such good company this year for "Best Short Story."

BL: Do you have a wants list of whom you want to work with?
CS: Well, in a sense that has already happened for us. We've been fortunate enough to work with Alan Moore. A lot of people who are doing stuff with us are people whose work I've really liked and have now come over to our label. Dylan Horrocks who does Pickle and Hicksville, Craig Thompson with Goodbye Chunky Rice, our all ages book. We carry stuff by minicomics maestro James Kochalka, but he's so prolific that it takes the full force and dollars of all of the smaller publishers in America to keep him in print. He could bury any one of us in terms of the volume of the material he produces all by himself.

BL: Do you keep an eye on foreign language comics at all?
CS: I try and read as much as I can if it's translated. My partner, Brett Warnock, reads as much as he can whether it has been translated or not. I love looking at the craftsmanship of European comics, but I can't read them myself.

BL: You've talked of your desire to see some kind of industry-wide comics promotion. How do you feel Free Comic Day served that purpose?
CS: It's hard to tell. I don't know if an industry-wide article or "post-mortem" was done on the event, though the few retailers I talked to suggested that at least that particular day was successful. Whether Free Comics Day, or even the success of the *Spider-Man* movie, has made comics more popular is a hard thing to actually quantify, but I know one thing for sure: neither one could hurt. Progress, at all times, is doing everything that you can do to move something forward, and only later, when you can look back, will you notice if they worked or not. So, ultimately, just the fact that these things are being done means that they're probably working the way we want them to on a larger scale that we can't actually see. So, ultimately, I do feel that Free Comics Day had a positive effect.

BL: Where do you see Top Shelf being in 5 years' time?
CS: I really had no idea Brett and I would be in the situation we are in now with Top Shelf five years ago. We have just been working the hardest we can. It's only when you look behind you that you see how far you've actually come. I'm just hoping that in 5 years' time I can look back and see that we've travelled some distance. I mean, each year I travel all around the world, taking Top Shelf to 17 conventions world wide each year. We got into this business to make great comics and I don't mind seeing other publishers putting out some great comics too, in fact I think it's fantastic. The fact that I've been able to work with Alan Moore, one of my personal inspirations for getting into comics in the first place, has been the best; and as long as we can keep doing great comics, I'm happy.

BL: And last, but most importantly, which of your upcoming titles and projects are you most excited by?
CS: Three Fingers by Rich Koslowski and Creature Tech by Doug TenNapel this summer; Pistol Whip: The Yellow Menace by Matt Kindt & Jason Hall this fall; and a whole slew of really cool books next year.

BL: Chris, thank you very much.

CAPTION NOIR

PULL your snap-brim hat down low over your forehead. Turn up the collar of your overcoat as you step out into the slanted, driving rain. Ignore the distant howling of sirens, the faint screams from behind locked doors, the sharp crackle of gunfire… the streets are mean tonight, but you've little choice, you must walk them. Move warily, keeping a cautious eye on the blurred patches of darkness seemingly oozing out of waste-filled alleyways, until you reach the Oxford Union. It's time for Caption 2002, baby, and you have a hot and heavy date with it…

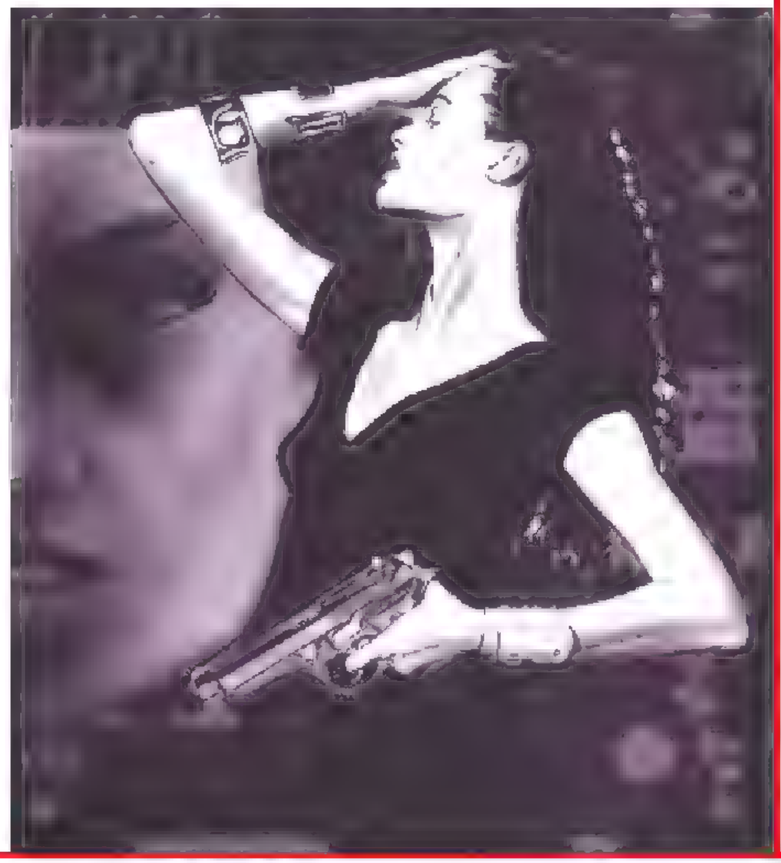
Yes, the theme for the 2002 Caption small press and self-published comics festival, now in its eleventh year, is "Noir". The chances are though, that most of the black you'll encounter there will be of the Gothic variety rather than the kind of sub-Chandler/Spillane scenario outlined above. And since it'll be taking place on Saturday 17 and Sunday 18 August, it's to be hoped that sunshine will be the order of the day, not cold, driving rain! But let's stay with the spirit of it for now…

As regular Caption attendees are aware, this is one of the most relaxed and friendly comics gatherings on the calendar. It takes place in the august Victorian surroundings of the Oxford Union Society on St. Michael's Street, Oxford, UK and the central gathering places are the capacious bar and, weather permitting, a delightful walled garden. Activities including a couple of panel discussions based on the theme for the event are generally organised, workshops on how to produce your own comics, an auction of artwork for charity and a themed exhibition of work. There'll also be plenty of people selling those hard to find small press comics! But above all, it offers a chance for small press comics creators and readers to meet, chat, swap ideas, trade, buy and generally enjoy themselves in pleasant surroundings for a couple of days.

There's a participatory angle to it too. Attendees are encouraged to bring along a specially prepared minicomic of their own – and they mean *mini*comic, preferably A6 maximum and with no limit on size except that it should consist of at least two panels. It doesn't matter whether you can draw or not, either; collages or prose pieces are more than welcome. And if you don't feel like putting anything together, well, that's OK too, bub.

You can find full details of the event, and of available accommodation, online at *http://caption.org/2002/*, together with an online application form for tickets – the cost of entry for the weekend is £9.00 waged or £6.00 unwaged in advance, and £12.00 on the door.

So step carefully over the mashed remains of yesterday's newspaper, drifting listlessly in the gutter; walk just a touch faster as the howling of those sirens rides a little closer on the bitter wind; do your best not to scowl at all the tourists as you tread cautiously through the seething Oxford city centre crowds… and



IN LIMBO

Brian Augustyn and Brett Booth have the directions. They offer a few pointers in Limbo City, a new eight-issue limited series from Dreamwave Productions. Brett Booth lays out the map; Borderline's Mike Sivier takes notes.

"ON the road to eternity, the exit for Limbo City is literally your last stop for last chances.

"Limbo City is a vast, seemingly endless urban sprawl situated at the nexus between Heaven and Hell, not far from the intersection of life and death.

"Limbo City is your destination if you die with unfinished business of the sort that would impede your progress to whatever your final destination might be.

"Limbo City is the place to exorcise your lingering demons, shake off your fears and failings, and dump your excess baggage.

"Limbo City is, ultimately, the place to solve the mystery of your life."

That's the way the blurb goes, anyhow. On the streets of this metaphysical purgatory we meet Sam Angelo, a demoted angel who has been relegated to Limbo City to help lost souls. When a ruthless, bitter tycoon dies sour and alone of old age, but arrives unhappily in Limbo City wearing his own five-year-old body, Sam has to chase down the answers. The trail will put the angelic detective up against the gangster-like forces of Hell, which would claim the old man - and against the crusty client's unwillingness to look honestly at his own past.

The road to **Limbo City** was a little less convoluted for artist Brett Booth. He hadn't been doing a regular comicbook for a while, and was just finishing a miniseries for another publisher when Pat Lee contacted him about doing a book through Dreamwave.

Brett Booth: I got to talking with Adam Fortier about licensed properties since they're doing Transformers, and jokingly told him they should go for *Thundercats*, because I'd loved the cartoon as a kid. A week or so later he asked Brian [Augustyn] and I to put together a proposal for *Thundercats*, plus another book in case Dreamwave didn't get the licence. Brian came up with Limbo City, we didn't get *Thundercats*, and that's about it.

Borderline: What attracted you to this project? Did you know Brian Augustyn before Limbo City?
BB: I'd talked to Brian through e-mail a couple of times a few years ago. Brian is the reason I said yes. He's one of the two writers I really wanted to work with. I'm also very interested in religious mythology so Limbo was very interesting to me."

BL: Who's the other one?
BB: Mark Waid. *(smiles)*

BL: Brian Augustyn seems attracted to certain themes, to judge by his work on Crimson. Do they appeal to you too? If so, why?
BB: We're both very interested in mythology and religious belief systems. If we call each other, we usually wind up talking for hours. I just find that stuff really fascinating, and it's a great breeding ground for story ideas.

BL: There's a strong theological - or at least philosophical - background to this series, set as it is on the cusp of Heaven or Hell. Has Brian adapted your style to push that feeling across to the reader?
BB: The religious stuff is really more background, it provides a setting. Limbo City is basically detective noir with metaphysical accessories. I'm trying to do a lot more with facial expressions and working on my storytelling, and Brian does full script so I don't end up having to guess what characters are thinking or feeling. It's more subtle than a lot of things I've worked on; nobody is running around fighting all the time or having to save the world.

BL: Moving on to more general matters, what materials do you use? Are you a traditionalist or do computers play a part in your art?
BB: I use a 2H pencil, a kneaded eraser, one of those vinyl clicky erasers, a triangle, and sometimes a circle template if I can't find an appropriately-sized round object. Very low tech. I've tried to draw on the computer and just can't. I hardly ever even scan my own pages because my colorist is very picky. I'm not having any inks done on Limbo City; it's being coloured directly over the pencils and the pencil lines are being integrated very heavily into the colours.

BL: Okay, so are you the kind of artist who needs to get conditions right - say, nobody else around, mood-setting music playing in the background, and so on - before you can get into a project? Or are you the sort who could sketch away in any situation?

BB: We have 18 dogs, so our house is very chaotic and, if I needed certain quiet conditions to work, I'd never get anything done. Sometimes I need to be in a working mood, but I don't have any sure fire ways to get in the mood, unfortunately.

BL: What do you have planned for the future - after Limbo?

BB: Limbo City is an eight issue miniseries, and if it does well we may do another one. Otherwise I've got nothing definite.

*The first issue of **Limbo City** is out in September. Boasting a triple-gatefold cover by Brett Booth, the 32-page comic retails for $2.95.*

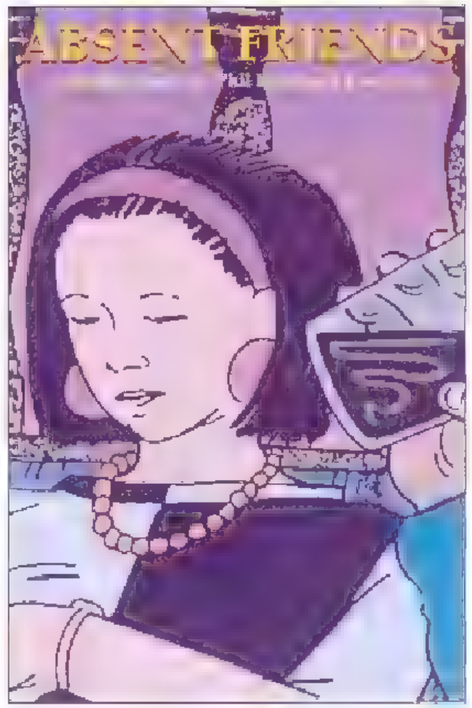
FOR ABSENT FRIENDS...

"FOR a period, Phil (**Illegal Alien**) Elliott and Paul (**Jack Staff**) Grist collaborated on a series of comic strips that were printed in a diverse selection of magazines..." What's the point of having comics journalists when the creator writes such eloquent and informative press releases?

Absent Friends is the eponymous collection of those collaborative efforts. It brings together Phil Elliot's tales of young love, struggling artistes and sex with Paul Grist's "sensitive rendering and supreme draughtsmanship" – why re-write a perfectly useable press release?

While Elliot has chosen to self-publish this wonderful little package, he has done so with the modern self-publishing ethos of producing a comic that speaks volumes in terms of overall thought about production. This perfect-bound product has a laminated cover and uses a heavy weight of paper - so while this may sound just a little bit boring, it means you can guarantee that your copy of **Absent Friends** won't fall apart if you read it in the bath!

Borderline asked Elliot what inspired him to bring the **Absent Friends** collection out now? "It was a friend who suggested putting out a collection like **Absent Friends**. The stories originally appeared all over the place, **Escape**, **Taboo**, **Fox Comics** and elsewhere and he reckoned people would like to see them all together, especially Paul's new fans, from **Kane** and **Jack**



Staff. I think they show another side to Paul's art - there's some wonderful drawing here."

So, where's Elliot been recently? "I've been a bit quiet with regard to comics work. I got sidelined into doing some computer animation - doing a *Jonni Starr* serial every month for 3 years that appeared on *MacFormat*'s cover CD. That took up quite a bit of my time and I also kinda lost my 'muse' a bit."

What can we expect from Phil Elliot over the coming months?

"I'm currently working on a series of single-page strips titled *Pool Tales*, featuring my old character, Gimbley. I'm also drawing a new comicbook, **Tupelo**, with a US writer, Matt Degennero, which we're touting around at the moment, though we may have to end up self-publishing. Elsewhere, I'll be colouring **Jack Staff**, when Paul Grist takes that to Image in the New Year, and there's a good chance that **Illegal Alien**, the comicbook I did with James Robinson, will be reprinted. We're in talks with a US publisher (I daren't say who just yet in case it doesn't go ahead. It's all to do with contracts at the moment!)."

And what are the chances of more collected Phil Elliot works?

"I'm thinking of putting out another book of 'old' work, collecting together some of the comics that I've done with Glenn Dakin, but I've got to wait until I've recouped the money I've spent on **Absent Friends**. I'd like to have a go at releasing this, and **Absent Friends**, 'big-time', and getting it distributed through Diamond, etc. Bit scared about doing that though. We'll see."

***Absent Friends** is a 40+ page b&w collection with a heavy stock colour cover and is available by mail order from 2 Alexandra Street, Maidstone, Kent ME14 2TD, England. The cost is: $6.00 US, £3.50 UK and €5.00, cheques payable to Phil Elliot.*

ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

IN the days following the US premiere of Road To Perdition - *starring Tom Hanks, Paul Newman and Jude Law , Sam Mendes' follow-up to his multi-Oscar winning directorial debut* American Beauty - *starring Tom Hanks, Paul Newman and Jude Law – **Borderline**'s Jay Eales spoke with the man who first breathed life into hitman Michael Sullivan, before Hanks hit the scene: award-winning novelist Max Allan Collins. One of a number of crime novelists who also work within the comics genre, Collins revived the ailing **Dick Tracy** newspaper strip, in a 15 year tenure on the series during which he also acted as a creative consultant on the Warren Beatty film. He also created the private eye series **Ms. Tree**, scripted **Batman** briefly, worked with Mickey Spillane on the Tekno Comix title **Mickey Spillane's Mike Danger**, and has carved out a successful sideline writing film novelizations. Beyond comics, Collins has won the esteemed Shamus Award for his crime novels – most notably those featuring his series detective character, Nathan Heller.*

Borderline: So... Tom Hanks, Paul Newman, Jude Law, Sam Mendes... You've got to be a very happy man, right?
Max Allan Collins: As a long-time film buff, and indie filmmaker myself, to have my story told by such an all-star line-up is, obviously, a dream come true. Mendes is a terrific filmmaker, if an unusual choice for this property. But had an action-adventure director been assigned - someone who would have staged my elaborate shoot-outs - I might have ended up with a B movie action star, not Tom Hanks.

And Hanks is a great choice - this is, after all, the story of a father and son, and Hanks's Everyman quality, tempered by the off-beat gangster casting, is a wonderful mix. Inspired casting, really.

BL: Have you had an opportunity to see the movie yet?
MAC: I have seen the movie five times so far – four times at "events"... various premieres and such... and one time just sneaking off to my local movie house, where I sat unnoticed with my tub of popcorn and Coke and just took it in as a movie.

My involvement aside, it's a great film – a classic, or nearly so. I'm very lucky to have one of my stories at the heart of a picture like this. I believe it will last a long time and, here's where I'm really lucky, will lead people to my work long after I'm gone.

Interestingly, the toning down of my Hong Kong-style violence in the graphic novel makes the film more like my other books, in particular the Nathan Heller novels - the brief, shocking jolts of violence that I tend toward. The film also manages to encapsulate virtually the entire body of my work - elements of my Nolan caper novels, my hitman series about Quarry, the *Mommy* movies, Ms. Tree's quest for revenge for her husband's killer, obviously Heller, even Dick Tracy (and Junior)... it's all there, in one form or another.

BL: How faithful is the script to your original story?
MAC: Some writers wouldn't grasp this, but - as a filmmaker myself - I understand that a screenplay needs to compress and reorganize its source material. David Self's screenplay is extremely faithful to my graphic novel (and Mendes and his cinematographer, Conrad Hall, obviously replicate numerous of Richard Piers Rayner's illustrations).

About two/thirds of the film is straight from the graphic novel, sometimes right down to the dialogue (Self's earlier draft was full of my dialogue, but Mendes rightly pared a lot of it away). The other third is a very smart re-imagining and compression of the material - like emphasizing the father and surrogate son aspect of Looney and O'Sullivan (Rooney and Sullivan in the film) that is sort of just understood in the graphic novel. The Jude Law character is a good addition - he's essentially a composite of the various hitmen who pursue the father and son in the original story.

BL: I understand that you've written a prose novelization of the story, to accompany the film's release. What was it like, revisiting one of your own stories, compared to your other tie-in books? Did you have much opportunity to add to the original storyline?
MAC: This was the one major disappointment of this project. I wrote a 90,000 word novel, sort of combining the screenplay and the graphic novel, but staying very faithful to the movie. But, after the fact, somebody in DreamWorks licensing decided the book should only have material in it that's actually in the movie. So I was forced to cut it to only 50,000 words. It's still a

good novelization, and contains lots of history and backstory... but it could have been great.

BL: How did Road To Perdition come about in the first place? Why did you choose to tell it as a comics story rather than as a novel, for example? Was it creator-owned, or is copyright shared with DC/Paradox Press?
MAC: In the early '90s, editor Andy Helfer at Paradox Press asked me to do a graphic novel in the mode of my Nathan Heller historical detective novels... but he wanted a new central character, since Heller was already established.

Doing Heller research, I had run across the real-life story of John Looney and his homicidal son Connor - the Irish godfather of the Rock Island, Illinois 1920s, and his flawed heir - but never found a place for it in any of the Heller novels. So I combined this historical slice of life with my own desire to do an American samurai tale, using lots of Asian cinema-style over-the-top "heroic bloodshed". I was very into John Woo, Ringo Lam, Lone Wolf and Cub, and Kurosawa at the time.

BL: Is this the first time one of your stories has been adapted for the screen by anyone other than yourself?
MAC: There have been screenplays developed by other writers from my novels and comics, but this is the first to make it to the screen. Among those that *almost* got made were my Eliot Ness novel, The Dark City, and Ms. Tree, a feature film and TV series respectively.

BL: Has Road To Perdition *led to a surge in people optioning your other works?*
MAC: I wouldn't say a surge, just yet - but a lot is going on right now. We already had an option for Johnny Dynamite, from the Dark Horse mini-series that my longtime collaborator Terry Beatty and I did a few years ago - and that's *my* screenplay, too.

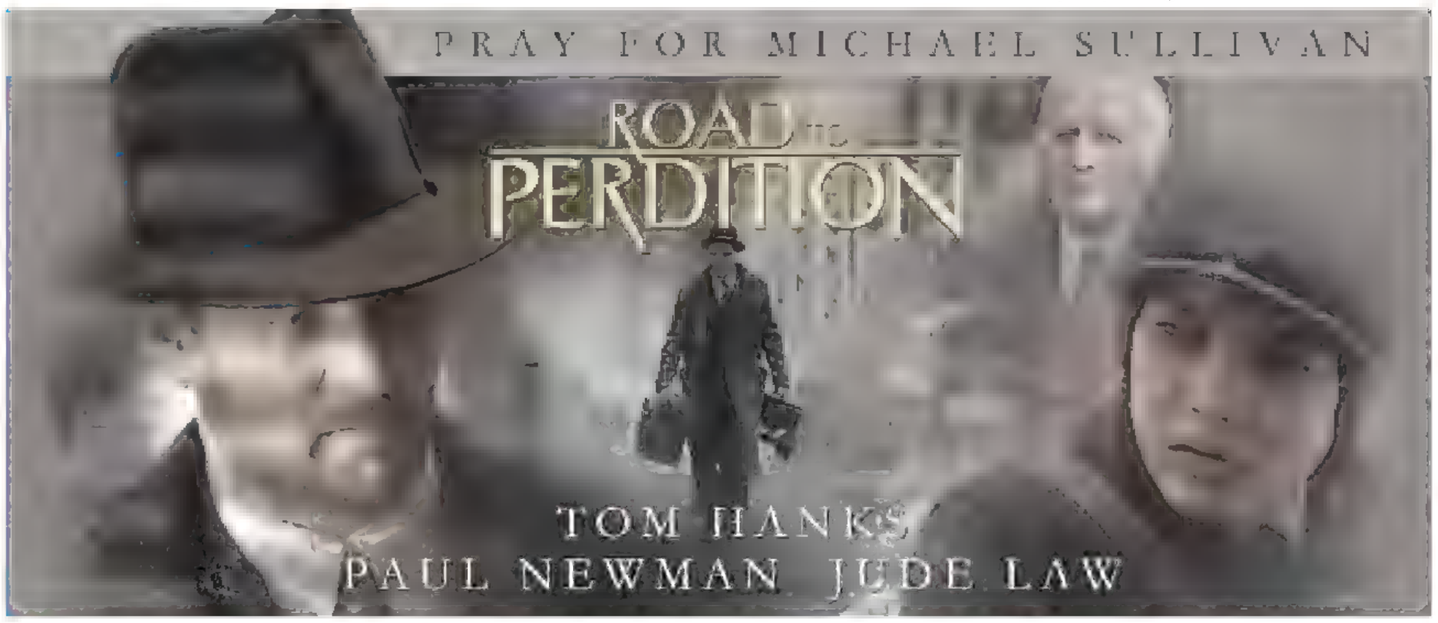
A lot of interest... but it's early yet. As we talk, the movie's only been out two weekends.

BL: Is Nate Heller heading for the big screen any time soon?
MAC: Lots of interest specifically in Heller... but the question is, do we pursue a big screen version of, say, the first novel, True Detective? Or do we take it to HBO or Showtime for a *Sopranos*-like series, to be taken from the dozen novels and two short story collections? Arguments can be made either way, convincingly.

We're exploring that.

BL: If you had to choose just one of your stories to be immortalised on the silver screen, which would it be, and why?
MAC: Well, that wish has come true, hasn't it? *Road To Perdition* fulfils that dream.

But next in line would be Nathan Heller - probably True Detective, though it's not my favorite of the series... just the logical one, because it's the first and really develops the character, takes him on a journey. Recurring detective characters are problematic for big screen adaptation, because a Sherlock Holmes or Mike Hammer just doesn't grow or change the way a protagonist in a film needs to. That's why they work much better on TV.



BL: Were you involved in the film production at all, or do you follow the same philosophy as Alan Moore: that you already told your story, and now they'll tell theirs, and good luck to them?
MAC: I stayed close to producer Dean Zanuck, and read various drafts of the screenplay, making occasional e-mail comments and suggestions. And my wife Barb and I visited the set in Chicago.

But, really - I didn't think Sam Mendes needed my help. Once I knew I didn't have the screenplay assignment, I had to sort of "let go".

BL: It's a little disappointing to see the way the publicity for Road To Perdition *so far (at least on this side of the pond) seems to have glossed over or ignored its graphic novel origins. It occurs to me that this was a golden opportunity to show that comics don't begin and end with superheroes. What are your thoughts on the subject?*
MAC: Actually, there's been enormous publicity for me and for the graphic novel source of this film. I've done dozens of interviews explaining what a graphic novel is, to the mainstream press. I have been astonished at how often my book and I are mentioned in reviews, sometimes even discussed in detail.

Early on, however, DreamWorks and a few of the filmmakers... even Hanks and Mendes, who have both expressed their admiration for the graphic novel to me, privately... seemed publicly embarrassed about the project's funny-book roots. But screenwriter David Self - a longtime comics fan himself - sort of straightened everybody out on that subject. Told the other filmmakers not to dismiss the graphic novel, but to proudly state their admiration of it.

BL: You're on record as saying that Road To Perdition is your finest hour in the comics form, and says everything that you wanted to say in the medium. Is that why you've decided to continue the story in another form, or have you changed your view since that interview? Are there more comics stories left in you?
MAC: Actually, the original intention was to follow Michael Jr. through two more graphic novels for Paradox Press, but of course the line was cancelled, so that never happened.

I will be doing more comics - probably not as much as I used to, though - but I have that Batman "manga", Child Of Dreams, on my plate; and maybe a C.S.I. mini-series, spinning off from my novels. And a "Tales from the Road To Purgatory" is in discussion stages with one of the major comics publishers. This would detail various adventures Michael O'Sullivan and his son had on the road. I'm hoping Richard Piers Rayner can be involved.

But the novels Road To Purgatory and Road To Paradise... I've just done a deal with a New York publisher to do them... will be prose novels. It's possible graphic novel versions would follow - that would be ideal.

It's just that a story that has now been viewed by so many people cannot be continued in what, unfortunately, is a niche market. And comics are not mainstream - a graphic novel remains an oddity. I hate that... but I'm not going to sacrifice myself and my career on that particular cross. Besides, I've always been - first and foremost - a writer of novels. Comics is a sideline for me.

CZECH COMICS

In recent issues of Borderline *you've read about how the comics scene in Poland originated and has grown. Now* Tomas Prokupek *introduces us to the history and development of comics in another formerly Communist nation – Czechoslovakia.*

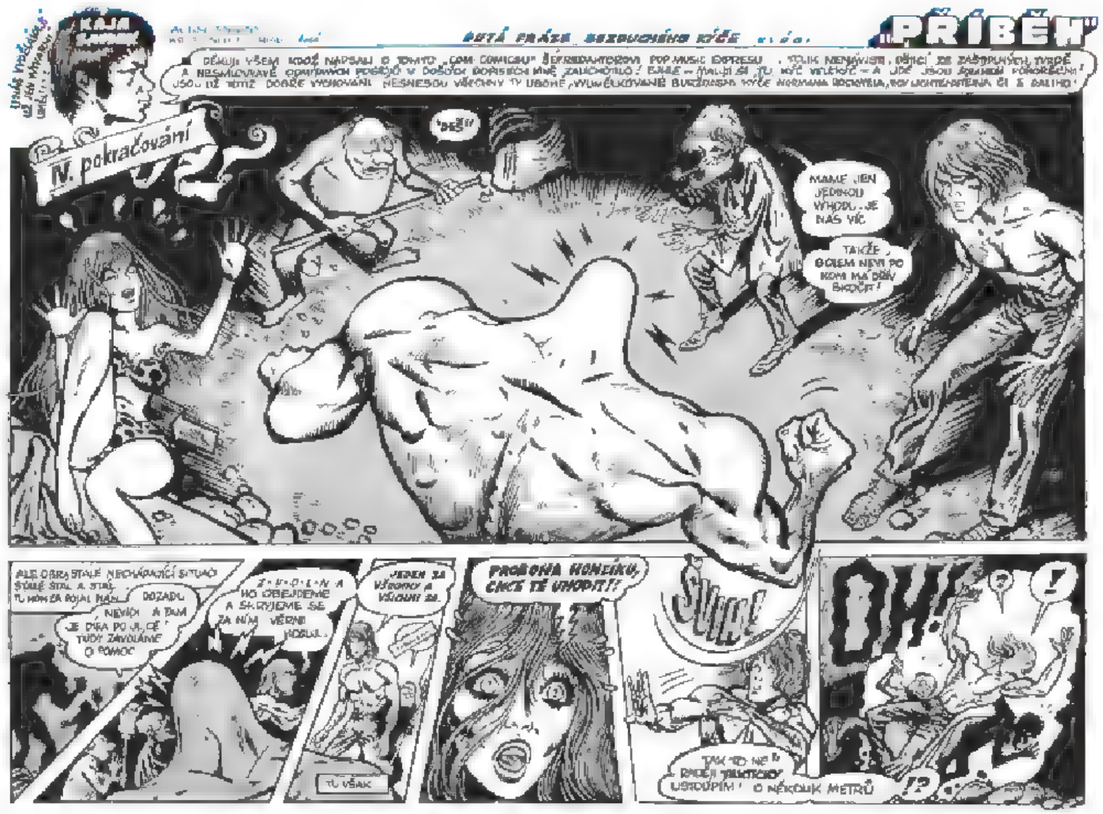
Fast Arrows

WHILE it is sometimes claimed that the first Czech pictorial stories were John Amos Comenius' **Orbis pictus** (**The World Illustrated**, a children's textbook published in 1658) and Wenceslas Hollar's mid-17th century engravings, this article will focus on the development of Czech comics during the last one hundred years. At the very beginning of the 20th century the newspapers were full of proto-

comics, but the first really significant Czech material appeared in 1938 and was called **Rychle sipy** (**Fast Arrows**). It told stories about a group of five boys and contained all the attributes typical of modern comics (dialogue in speech balloons, dynamic compositions etc).

Fast Arrows has retained a cult status up to the present, for two reasons. The first is that it was a fortunate meeting of very talented authors. The scriptwriter, Jaroslav Foglar, was a famous writer of novels for boys. His scripts were sometimes too didactic, but were mostly amusing and adventurous. The illustrator, Jan Fischer, was an excellent draughtsman with an ability to catch the moods of his characters and with a delicate sense of hyperbole.

The second reason is that **Fast Arrows** ran into problems with political systems. The serial had always been absolutely non-political and non-aggressive, but the second half of the 20th century was really strange in my country. Originally, the comic was published in the boys' magazine *Mlady hlasatel* (*Young Announcer*). However, when Czechoslovakia was annexed by Nazi Germany in 1938-9, Czech and Slovak periodicals began to be cancelled. *Young Announcer* was closed down in 1941. After WW2, **Fast Arrows** was published in a similar magazine, *Vpred!* (*Ahead!*). The communists' relationship to comics has been explained enough in the article about the Polish scene in **Borderline** #11; for all that, it should be said that Polish communists were a bit more tolerant than the Czech ones. So, first the speech balloons were banned in **Fast Arrows** (because the balloons looked too "western") and then the whole series was banned. The authors tried to save their popular characters, creating a story where the Fast Arrows were helping to build "new, better tomorrows", but it was a waste of time.



The next period of relative freedom was the end of the 1960s. Old stories of the Fast Arrows started to be published in their own separate books. When the backlog was exhausted, Jaroslav Foglar began to write new stories. Jan Fischer had died, and his place was taken by Marko Cermak. His sequels were also popular, but his work wasn't so fine as that of his predecessor. However, the beginning of the 1970s saw the "normalisation" of the communist regime (with a return to a more hardline attitude) and the Fast Arrows got their next chance only after the Velvet Revolution in late 1989. In 1998 a big hardback exclusive book containing the complete **Fast Arrows** stories was published; it is the most successful Czech comics material of the last five years. The influence of **Fast Arrows** had been so great that more than 20% of all Czech production in the period from 1960 to1985 was stories about groups of boys and girls.

CO TO VIDÍM?!
JAK JE MOŽNÉ, ŽE UNIKLI Z MÉ HLADOMORNY? MUSÍM JE DEFINITIVNĚ ODPRAVIT, NEBO NAKONEC NEJEN KAZILI MÉ ZLOČINNÉ PLÁNY!

Advent of "The King"

The time after 1948, when the communists took control over Czechoslovakia, was a sad one for creators and fans of comics. The first new material with speech balloons was allowed in 1956. Then comics began very slowly to appear in magazines for children and teenagers. The first characters were pioneers (members of a communist youth organisation) and their stories were deadly dull,

RO POZVAL XERONA NA VÝPRAVU DO KOSMU
CHCETE LI, MŮŽETE LETĚT S NÁMI, GENERÁLE! TAM JE TÖTIŽ PRÁCE PRO SKUTEČNÉ CHLAPY. A O TO VÁM JDE, JAK JSEM POZORoval...
TEĎ MÁM ZROVNA JINOU PRÁCI...
VÁS PŘITAHUJE NĚCO VÍC NEŽ PUSHODRUŽSTVÍ?
PROBOHA, TEN ČLUN ZATÍM JAKÉSI VÁŠNÍ NĚJAKOU OSIDLOU..
TOHLE JE PRO MNE SILNĚJŠÍ MAGNET!
V OBAVÁCH DOEŠLA MURIEL NA AERODROM A XERON ZŮSTAL S DÍVKOU SAM...

but later the stories developed more interesting protagonists and came to be funny.

Nevertheless, the real breakthrough was a film named *Kdo chce zabit Jessii?* (*Who Wants to Kill Jessie?)*, which was made in 1966. Its screenwriter, Milos Macourek, had wanted to make a motion picture about a girl who dreams about her teacher, until one night he emerges from her dreams and the adventures begin… Then Macourek met an unknown young artist who was keen on comics. His name was Kaja Saudek (his twin brother, Jan, later became a famous photographer). Saudek's enthusiasm was so catching that Macourek reworked the screenplay completely. So the comedy *Who Wants to Kill Jessie?* tells about a woman scientist, who builds a machine which surveys the night-time dreams of humans, and her husband, who is a big fan of an adventurous SF strip about a beautiful blonde heroine named Jessie. The scientist experiments with her husband's dreams - and Jessie, together with the villainous Superman (i.e. a strong man) and Gunman (i.e. a cowboy), appears in our reality. The bad guys want to kill Jessie, but the biggest danger to her is presented by the jealous scientist…

It's remarkable that this comedy could have been made in a country almost without a comics culture. Despite that, the film was very successful. Its parody of comics was relatively gentle and contained many original ideas (for example, all the characters from the strip continue to use speech balloons when in the real world). And Kaja Saudek, who had created the fictional strip about Jessie and had designed the costumes, got a chance to draw comics for magazines.

His first important hero was a hippie, **Honza Hrom** (**Johnny Thunder**). The panels of this piece were full of exaggerated perspectives, tempting girls and little gags in the background, which became a trademark of all the artist's subsequent works. Saudek's self-authored script overflowed with wild fantasy, with Johnny Thunder having to deal with the legendary Prague Golem - but the strip was banned by the communists at the most dramatic point in its action. Unfortunately, this became the typical pattern for the artist's subsequent comics.

Hopeless struggle

Kaja Saudek collaborated with several magazines but, sooner or later, his stories were always stopped on the grounds that they were "injurious capitalistic kitsch". However, the artist was as stubborn as a mule and prepared a comic book named **Muriel a andele** (**Muriel and the Angels**), adapting a script by Macourek. The story was a typical child of the '60s, encapsulating the intoxicating and naive atmosphere of those times; the lovely physician Muriel and Ro, a winged man from the future, try to protect a boy, Mike Richardson, who will grow up to disband all armies throughout the world - but evil General Xeron is doing everything he can to change that future... Saudek even drew a sequel, entitled **Muriel a oranzova smrt** (**Muriel and the Orange Death**). Both parts together amounted to over 250 pages. But in August 1968 Czechoslovakia was occupied by the tanks of the Warsaw Pact, and any chance to publish these comics was lost, for more than two decades.

So Kaja Saudek began to try to collaborate with foreign magazines. Although he created an erotic story, **Sylterella**, for a German journal, he never received the promised payment. After he'd had similar bitter experiences with Polish and Yugoslavian magazines, he took a desperate step and drew a propagandistic strip, **Major Zeman** (**Major Zeman**), adapting a popular TV series. But the basis of Saudek's style was so ironic in nature that, yet again, the strip was forbidden. The artist had to live by drawing illustrations for children's magazines. Yet his love of comics remained so strong that he still produced them, for a half-illegal bulletin of the Czech Speleology Society! His most significant "caving" material is called **Arnal a dva draci zuby** (**Arnal and the Two Dragon's Teeth**) and is based on a script by Ondrej Neff. It depicts the adventures of a rather dim-witted superhero in a post-catastrophic world and was eventually translated into Polish,

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Hungarian, Finnish, and Norwegian.

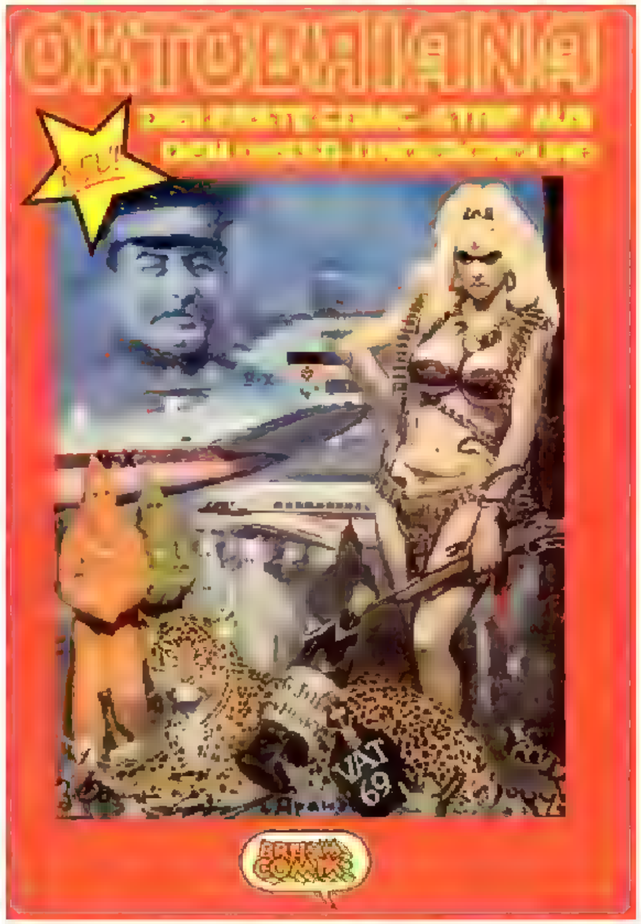
After the fall of Communism many of Kaja Saudek's older comics were published, in hundred of thousands of copies. Readers could buy **Muriel and the Angels** at last; unfortunately **Muriel and the Orange Death** was lost and has yet to be located. Paradoxically, Saudek moved away from comics after the Velvet Revolution and began to draw more lucrative, explicit illustrations for erotic magazines instead. Capitalism has proved to be more successful in stopping him than all the years of Communism. However, Kaja Saudek is still perceived as being "the King" - the greatest Czech creator of comics.

Russian Devil woman

The end of the 1960s and the beginning of the '70s brought the tragicomic events concerning **Octobriana**, the only comics character created in Czechoslovakia who has gained a certain reputation in the West.

Petr Sadecky, a student of the Film Academy of Performing Arts in Prague, was the initiator of an adventure comics story starring a charming female hero, which was intended for a Western publishing house. The heroine was supposed to be called Amazona, whose mission was to lead savages in their fight against civilization. The drawing was handled by the experienced illustrator Bohumil Konecny. Even Zdenek Burian, a well known painter of scientific reconstructions of prehistoric reptiles, was invited onto the project and was asked to design the covers.

However, in 1967 Sadecky emigrated to the West and took most of Konecny's and Burian's work with him. He renamed Amazona as **Octobriana**, adding a red star on her forehead and turning her into a warrior fighting for the true Communism. What is more, he passed the story off as the product of a fictitious Ukrainian underground organization, PPP – Progressive Political Pornography. The album with Octobriana's adventures was published in Great Britain, the United States and Germany. Even though the whole fraud was soon revealed, many people in the West still believe Sadecky's story even now.



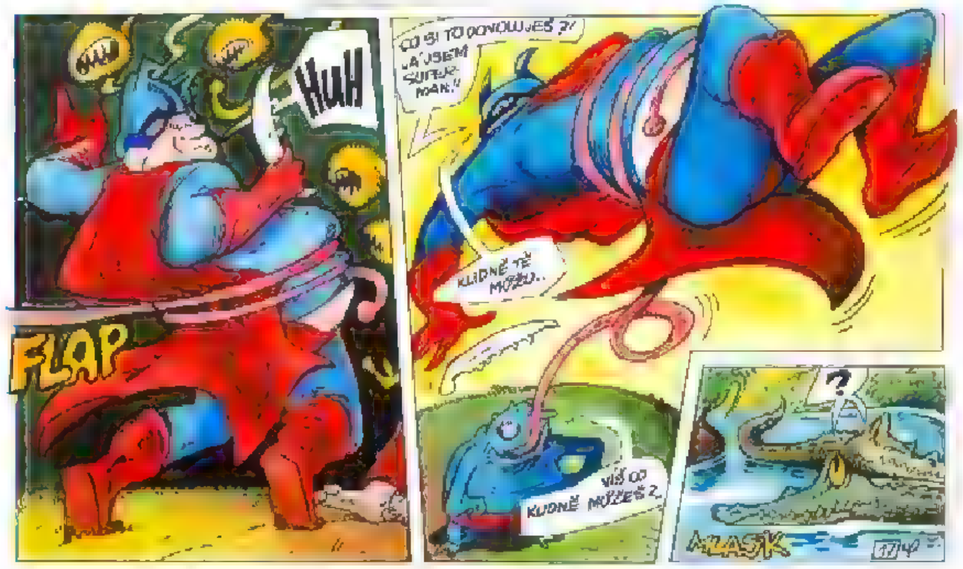
This episode resulted in big trouble for Zdenek Burian and Bohumil Konecny. Communist periodicals attacked both artists for having created "disgusting pornography" for money. Czechoslovakian TV made a documentary in which Burian and Konecny had to explain the genesis of the blonde, savage heroine in order to excuse themselves. Burian had enough contacts and jobs abroad that the communists were afraid to stop his activities. Konecny wasn't so lucky. He wasn't allowed to illustrate books any more and was effectively forced out "to pasture". Unfortunately, he died a year after the collapse of Communism. Sadecky settled in Germany and lived by making TV documentaries and setting up insurance frauds. He died in 1991, taking many secrets with him.

The further career of Octobriana has been interesting, as well. She has appeared in

Bryan Talbot's **The Adventures of Luther Arkwright**, Larry Weltz's American erotic comic **Cherry's Jubilee**, miniseries issued by British publishing houses Revolution Comics and Artful Salamander, an episode of **2000AD**'s *Nikolai Dante*, several projects by Finnish artist Reima Makinen – and a new Octobriana story was also created by Czech artist Karel Jerie this year. It seems that this heroine is much more viable than her original creators could have imagined.

Brains in revolt

Although the situation during the '70s and the '80s wasn't promising, there were still some official comics. The comics magazine **Ctyrlistek (Four-Leaved Clover)** was intended by its spiritual father and cartoonist, Jaroslav Nemecek, for schoolchildren, but many adults also used to read it during those decades. Its main characters are four anthropomorphic animals: a cat, Myspulin, who invents crazy gadgets; a strong pig, Bobik, who is a pretty heavy eater; a rather sissy bunny, Pinda, who can run very fast; and a dog, Fifinka, a bitch who brings a female element into the group. The scriptwriter, Ljuba Stiplova, was a science fiction fan, so Myspulin & Co.'s adventures were full of rockets, time machines, mad robots etc., but they contained absolutely no violence - nothing like *Tom & Jerry*, for instance. Many other comics have also appeared in the magazine besides the title series, and a lot of them have been adapted into TV animated cartoons. Although the magazine wasn't permitted to be published as a regular monthly, appearing only nine times a year, it was in great demand and ranked among the periodicals that were hardest to get hold of. **Four-Leaved Clover** still exists, in competition with **Donald Duck**, **Pokemon** and others. However, Nemecek now uses computer colouring and lettering, which looks very cold, and the plots of the stories are more down to earth, lacking their original spirit.



Another magazine that became a stronghold of comics for youth was called *ABC*. It published articles about nature and technology and each issue gave some space to comics serials. Their pages contained an extremely large number of panels, which were often full of text, and the stories used propagandistic themes from time to time - but readers were very hungry for pictorial stories. Some of the scripts were not too bad and *ABC* illustrator Frantisek Kobik was rather popular. His best material, **Vzpoura mozku (Revolt of the Brains)**, scripted by Vaclav Sorel, tells of a fatal future war between mankind and insurgent androids. Unfortunately *ABC* publishes only foreign comics today, because they are cheaper and often connected with well-known films or TV serials.

AŽ VYPERETE, ZKUSÍME RACHEJTLI VÍŘIVOU, BEZBARVOU... BEZBARVÁ BY ŠLA!
ALE ZKOUŠET JI BUDETE VENKU!
TOBĚ SE NĚCO PÁLÍ?
NE! PROČ?
NĚCO HOŘÍ!! MYSPULÍN JE UVNITŘ!!
ZACHRAŇTE HO!
JEN ABY VYDRŽEL TEN PUCH!
JDU TAM!!

Underground Harvester

The real Czech comics underground started to develop in the second half of the '70s. It wasn't political. Its creators were bored by stupid and empty official culture, and they looked for a way to express their feelings or tell their own stories. They didn't want to fight against the regime, they only wanted to play with the genre and experiment freely. However, some of them had problems with the STB (the Czech equivalent of the KGB).

The first herald of the underground was a comic called **Kombajn (Harvester)**, which was launched in 1977 by students led by Martin Nemec at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. The

magazine had only a brief life and contained very avant-garde pieces that were influenced by Saudek's **Muriel** (**Harvester** authors had borrowed original copies), **Metal Hurlant** and Robert Crumb. Nevertheless, some of its contributors remained loyal to comics and continued to draw for other magazines after the fall of Communism.

Another outstanding personality of the underground comics is Vladimir Tucapsky. He drew during the 1980s and published, in very limited quantities, comics which fall into the alternative field. He likes **Fast Arrows**, The Beatles and Tarzan, and his material is full of humorous allusions to them. His major life's work is the book **Pout do zeme safranu** (**Pilgrimage to the Land of the Saffrons**). It was inspired by Hermann Hesse's novel **The Journey to the East**, Jaroslav Foglar's novelette **The Hut in the Lake Hollow** and Edgar Rice Burroughs' books, and relates a very poetic story about searching for the meaning of life. In **Pilgrimage to the Land of the Saffrons** we can find hand-painted passages (each copy is an original), objects sticking out of the pages or even places which have been deliberately burned or soaked.

Kloaka (**Cloaca**), the second significant work by Tucapsky, originated as a massive expansion of Foglar and Fischer's story **Fast Arrows in the Underground** (in the original **Fast Arrows** tale the word "undergound" had meant just a sewer, a "cloaca", into which a ball had fallen). The comic is full of wild collages and visions and amounts to a homage to the possibilities of the medium. Tucapsky has produced quite a few other things and continues to produce even today, with minor lapses in activity, and always regardless of external conditions.

A further underground work is Ondrej Neff's **Perak** (**Springer**). This story was based on a Prague legend from the period of World War 2. People had believed (or perhaps had wanted to believe) in the mysterious Springer, a man with big iron springs on his boots who fought against Nazis in the streets at night. However, Neff's tale is set in the 1980s and is very amusing and satirical. It was created in 1989 – people could feel that changes were coming…

Boom time

The Velvet Revolution in 1989 opened all doors; the new freedom was so sweet, and people were full of enthusiasm. A group of comics fans founded the Czechoslovak Comics Club, which organized regular meetings called Days of Czechoslovak Comics. Newsagents' stalls were glutted with comics magazines such as **Kometa** (**Comet**), **Arena** (**Arena**), **Stopa** (**Footprint**) and others. Thanks to them a new generation of cartoonists had its first chance to present its works to the general public. These guys were born in the 1950s and '60s and were very much inspired by Kaja Saudek's style and also by the French scene - the magazine **Pif Gadget** had been the only foreign comics journal available for sale in communist Czechoslovakia.

The new cartoonists are at all points exemplified by Miroslav Schoenberg, the most talented draughtsman of this generation. His style is full of dynamics, he is a master at catching characters' emotions and his knowledge of equine anatomy would make many western artists of cowboy stories feel small. Schoenberg's longest tale, **Piratuv odkaz** (**Pirate legacy**), depicts the adventures of an remarkable racehorse during the period of the Nazi occupation. Another of Saudek's disciples, illustrator Libor Pav, worked with scenarist Jiri Hrdlicka in producing an amiable parody of fantasy and superheroic comics called **Bantam: Tajemstvi cerneho brouka** (**Bantam: Mystery of the Black Beetle**). And it is a positive development that among a number of male comics artists who debuted in the early 1990s, it is possible to find a woman. Jana Kupkova-Komarkova's expressive and lyrical drawings even won an award in L. Ron Hubbard's Illustrators of the Future Contest in 1993.

All the same, in the new economic conditions things soon started to take a turn for the worse. The Czech market was too small, since the majority of people perceived comics as being infantile. So, the original enthusiasm faded away somehow and comics magazines went bankrupt. Most of the creators redirected their interests towards whatever they were able to make a living from. Only several strong-willed ones did not leave their favourite genre – for example,

Schoenberg has kept on, churning out comics for the children's magazine *Skaut* (*Scout*). In the mid-'90s the situation for Czech comics looked as unfavourable as during the deepest period of totalitarianism. A similar situation occurred not only in Poland, but also in Russia, Bulgaria and other post-Communist lands. All of these societies had to come through a deep transformation; and comics fans, once again, had to wait for better times.

Czech Trek: New Generation

A new turning point came in 1997 with the magazine **Crew** (**Blood**).

It has published brutal and bloody Anglo-American comics, and works by Czech authors have only appeared there sporadically. However, its merits in developing a new generation of comics readers are certainly unquestionable.

At the turn of the century the first fanzine, *Aargh!*, appeared as a reaction to **Blood**. It was also inspired by Vladimir Tucapsky's activities, and by the Polish and Slovenian fanzine scene. *Aargh!* offers a place to young Czech (and other) talents and affords plenty of high quality publicity. A second fanzine, *Pot* (*Sweat*), cropped up several months later and was soon followed by *Sorrel*, *BDman* and others.

And a new generation of artists has appeared together with the fanzines. They have many essentials in common, as well - they were born in the 1970s and early '80s, and Communism is only a faint memory to them. The "King" of their childhood was Kaja Saudek, but later they discovered (and are still discovering) Simon Bisley, Mike Mignola, Frank Miller and other similar authors. A characteristic example is Vladimir Broz, a.k.a. Wladimir 518, an excellent artist greatly influenced by Bill Sienkiewicz. Another true child of our post-industrial present is *Jiri Grus,* whose art is full of underlying darkness and doom.

The second face of contemporary Czech comics is represented by Tomas Kucerovsky's works, which show silent and dreamlike worlds. Many further artists' names could be mentioned - but it has to be said that this fanzine generation is still awaiting scriptwriters who can

produce long epic comics. Nevertheless, it is possible to see that they are going to emerge. And there are several other very positive tendencies. Two major publishers and a couple of smaller ones are putting out more and more translated pieces, and a new convention, called Comxcon, has been in operation since 2000.

If Poland needs to take the last step towards a normal situation in the comics field, the Czech Republic has yet to take two or three steps. We will see how difficult they will be.

MOHAIR DREAMS?

MIKROPOLIS - Mohair Dreams, the new album by Polish creators Dennis Wojda and Krzysztof Gawronkiewicz, will be published by Mandragora *(www.mandragora.com.pl)* in September and premiered at the International Comics Festival in Lodz, Poland. It will be the team's second book about the awkward town of Mikropolis and its peculiar inhabitants.

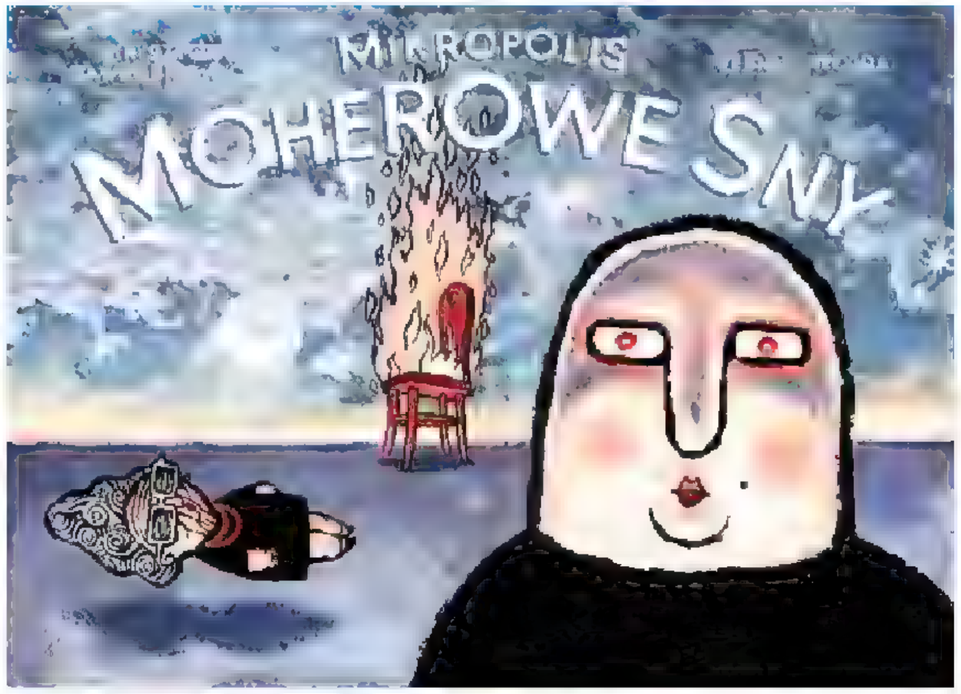
A collection of beautifully illustrated short tales, it is full of black humour, metaphors and references to a wide spectrum of influences - German Expressionist cinema, grade B horror movies, Franz Kafka, Einsturzende Neubauten, David Lynch and Luis Bunuel. Artist Gawronkiewicz, one of Poland's most original stylists, was featured in the *Drawing Board* section of Borderline #12.

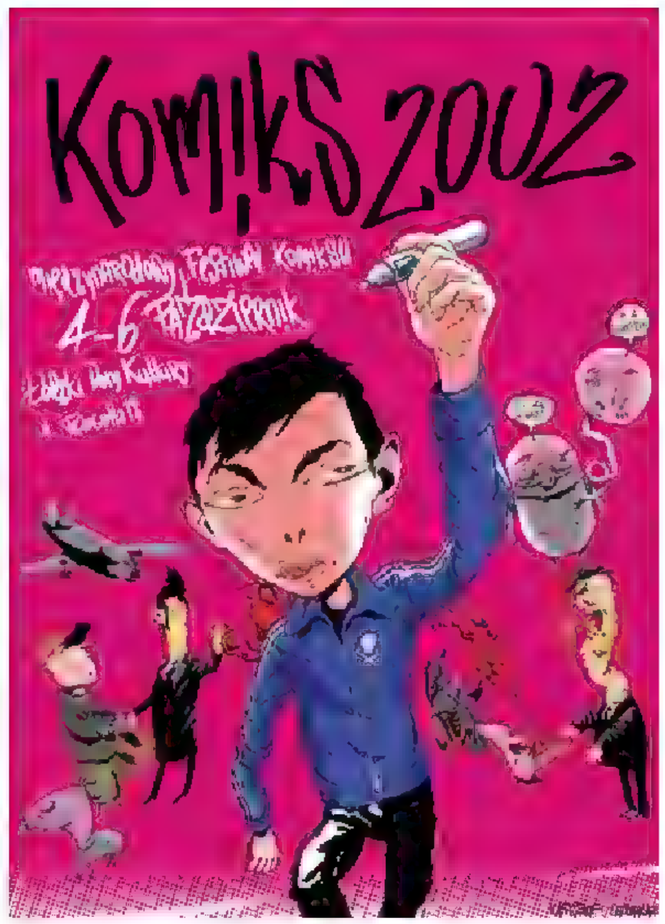
Krzysztof Skrzypczyk, a comics theorist and critic, commented on the first Mikropolis album in an interview for Poland's biggest selling newspaper, *Gazeta Wyborcza*, saying "I couldn't get used to this comic for a long time. I had to mature intellectually and aesthetically. From an artistic point of view it's a very sophisticated comic. Very subtle, very poetic and at the same time very funny."

A Chair in Hell, one of the longer episodes in the new book, won both the Grand Prix and Best Script prizes at the Lodz festival in 2000.

Mikropolis - The Tourist Guide, the first book in the series, was published in 2001 by Siedmiorog. It contained strips published in Polish magazines and newspapers between 1994 and 2000 and received very favourable reviews; the Polish edition of *Newsweek* hailed it as one of the best comics of 2001.

More information on these albums can be found at *www.mikropolis.com.pl* .





THE annual Lodz comics festival is held between the 4th and 6th of October 2002 in the central Polish city of Lodz.

It is now recognised as one of the most important Eastern European comics conventions with many guests from all over the world.

***Borderline** is hoping to attend this year's show.*

ISSUES

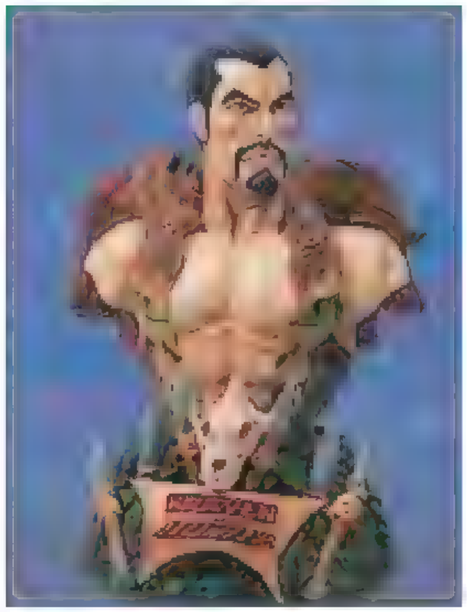
Stanley has an issue...

THOSE silly buggers at Marvel have only gone and brought back Kraven The Hunter. Yep, all that beautifully written, heart-rending *Kraven's Last Hunt* stuff from over a decade ago (which culminated in the character going out Kurt Cobain-style with a gun in his mouth) has been swept under the carpet for the cheap thrill of seeing the old man in leopard skin tussle with his not half as interesting son, Al Kravinoff. Worse than that, rather than taking centre stage, the confrontation between Kraven's past and present took place in a back-up story in the first issue of the current **Get Kraven** miniseries. Oh, the ignominy!

Unfortunately, the shoddy handling of Kraven's demise and return is just the tip of the iceberg. One of the things that most irritates me about long-running episodic fiction is that its writers can never kill off a character and just *leave* it that way. Nope, the fact that someone has shuffled off this mortal coil, joined the choir invisible and generally turned up their toes is no barrier to their eventual reappearance in one form or another. It's as if the afterlife comes with a revolving door through which characters can enter and exit at will.

Comics-wise, Spider-Man is absolutely the worst offender when it comes to indulging in a bit of the old "resurrection shuffle". Norman Osborn (as the Green Goblin), Gwen Stacy and Aunt May have all popped their clogs in the recent and not-so-recent past and yet back they all came (although Stacy MKII was a clone and the Aunt May that died turned out to be "an impostor". Or something.). It isn't just in the Amazing Spideyverse where no-one stays dead though, is it? Jean Grey/Phoenix, Elektra, Green Arrow and Superman have all spectacularly cheated the Grim Reaper at one time or another and it looks like Aquaman will be doing likewise when he returns soon in fine fishy fettle courtesy of Rick Veitch. It makes you wonder who's next for a return ticket on the Not-So-Dead-Really express - Barry Allen? Bucky? Kara Zor-El, the original Supergirl (what do you mean Peter David's bringing her back later in the year? Aaarghh!).

TV is easily as bad. Buffy The Vampire Slayer has snuffed it twice only to be returned to rude health each time (and Joss

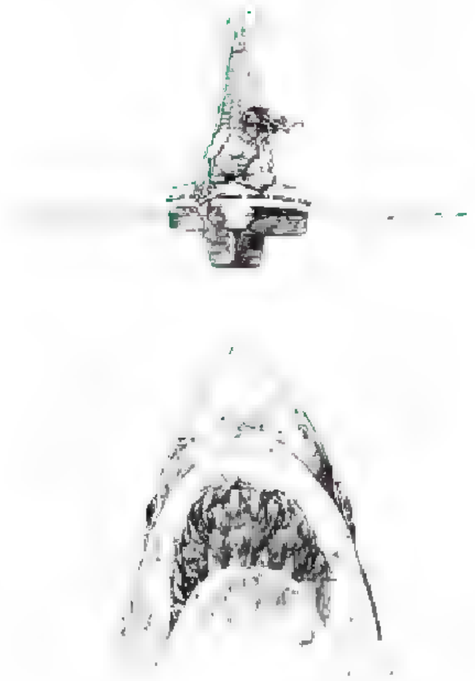


Whedon wonders why he's never got an Emmy nod), while the producers of *Dallas* once wrote off an entire season's storylines as a "dream", so desperate were they to resurrect Bobby Ewing. Even when a character stays dead on TV, they still find a way of making an appearance - *Six Feet Under*'s Nathaniel Fisher Snr. was offed in a car accident in episode one but has continually cropped up in dreams and fantasy sequences ever since, as has "Big Pussy" Bonpensiero, the chubby FBI nark "whacked" in *The Sopranos*' second season.

Still, to get back to my original complaint, none of this stuff is quite as rank as the way in which Kraven The Hunter has been returned to the Marvel Universe by writer Ron Zimmerman. If you haven't encountered Zimmerman before, he was the guy responsible for that insane and inane **Punisher** story in which Frank Castle went back in time to kill Al Capone, then woke up to discover his entire adventure was all just a dream. Oh yeah, and he also wrote the astonishingly lame "Jay Leno meets Spider-Man" story that seemed to appear in the back of every Marvel title for at least six months.

Anyway, the set up for Zimmerman's Big K return is basically this: after receiving a mysterious message to meet someone at his favourite bar, Kravinoff bumps into Spider-Man, they beat up some C list villains before Daddy Kraven turns up from beyond the grave rather unexpectedly. Cutting a short story shorter it turns out that it isn't really Kraven at all but his brother, otherwise known as insane shape shifter The Chameleon. The thing is, though, that The Chameleon is now totally off his trolley to the point where, according to Kravinoff: "In his mind and body, he is my father now [and] he'll come after us both one day. He's Kraven The Hunter now." In other words, Kraven's back, so get used to it!

Why do they do this stuff? Could resurrecting dead characters be a writer's way of commenting on the eternal nature of the human soul? Could bringing back the deceased be a way for comics and TV scribes to fend off thoughts of their own mortality? Or could it just be that the House of Ideas is suffering from a distinct *lack* of ideas and that raiding the past for characters and storylines is easier than coming up with anything new? I think we should be told.



Carol Close is currently sojourning at the Isle of Capri villa owned by her latest gentleman friend. Our repeated pleas for her column were eventually met with a brief response pointing out that she has better things to do with her time at the moment, darlings, and perhaps we could just toddle down to the nearest comics emporium and see if we might talk one of the charmingly fragrant clientele into writing something for us instead. So we did. But they were too busy discussing Star Trek, *so we gave up and roped in our usual stopgap contributor, Stanley.*

WHAT IS MANGA?

Kevin Hill looks at Masamune Shirow's stunning Appleseed.

WHAT started you on reading comics? If you are from the British Isles, what started you on reading US, or European, comics? Common questions all. Of course, there is another that should not be forgotten - what started you on reading Japanese comics? Strangely, that is a question rarely asked - at least of me.

When you think about it, there must have been a hook. Something special that caught your eye, dragged you in. Whether it was **Superman**, **Batman**, **Spider-Man**, the **X-Men**, *Dan Dare*, *Judge Dredd*, *Arzach* or any other comics, there must have been a hook.

Chances are you have yet to find the hook that will get you reading Japanese comics. There has not been a better time to dabble, with the list of releases growing at an alarming rate - well, alarming from the point of view of the wallet/purse. As the list is growing bigger, so the range of genres covered is also growing. But there has to be a hook.

Obviously it would be difficult to list books that might hook you. Everyone has different tastes, after all - but at the moment you could not be more spoilt for choice. In the 80s it was a different matter. The list of books being translated into English and released was small. Companies were taking chances by releasing Japanese comics.

One company, Eclipse, took such a chance on publishing a work by Masamune Shirow - more famous for being the creator of the **Ghost In The Shell** series. That series was **Appleseed**, a sprawling sci-fi epic, and that was the hook that caught me.

While I tend to dislike writing from a personal point of view - although many of the series I've written about already are ones I like myself - **Appleseed** is a series that rarely gets a mention compared with Katsuhiro Otomo's **Akira**, or Shirow's own **Ghost In The Shell**. It is unfair to compare **Appleseed** with either of those series. **Appleseed** does share a post-World War III setting with **Akira**, and has a similar focus on a military taskforce as does **Ghost In The Shell**, but that is about it.

Less concerned with the metaphysical, **Appleseed** is instead grounded in reality - well, of a kind. Shirow has constructed an entire future time-line, one which he proceeded to detail in length in the two **Appleseed Data Books** released by Dark Horse Comics in the late 90s.

The beginning of *Appleseed* introduces us to two characters, Deunan Knute and Briarios Hecatonchires, who are the primary focus of the series. Deunan could give Sigourney Weaver a lesson in being tough, having grown up around guns and the military special forces thanks to her father. Briarios, a cyborg, is Deunan's guardian, partner, and lover - seriously.

When we first meet them, the couple are living in an area referred to as *bad side*, places hit by the ravages of war. Here they are contacted by a young woman, Hitomi, who persuades them to leave *bad side* and travel to the city of Olympus, a new city that appeared during the wars that raged across the world. Olympus: a paradise on Earth, the perfect city. Or is it?

This last question is, essentially, the focus of the first two books of **Appleseed**, as Deunan and Briarios seek to acclimatise to the new world in which they find themselves. In this new world, the old world - and all of the problems that plagued it - is still in evidence. As such there are both police and military forces within Olympus, forces which - thanks to their previous military experience - Deunan and Briarios become members of.

Shirow could, like countless before him, have just concentrated on the military aspect of the story. As Deunan and Briarios are the main characters, understandably the story spends a lot of time with them, either during operations, or training. But underlying all of the military actions are the political machinations of the Olympus government and political situations relating to other countries, states, unions or religions that have risen during the wars. Shirow effectively manages to show all this, providing a backdrop against which the action side of the series can play out.

Like many other Japanese artists, Shirow is expert in constructing complex action scenes. Speed lines feature a lot, but the fighting taking place has a pacing and use of panels that impress, seeming almost movie-like in execution. Couple this with the advancement of Shirow's style from the heavy, clean-lined look of the first two volumes to the densely detailed and shaded style in the latter volumes - Volume 3 being of particular note, with many of the scenes set at night, or in the rain.

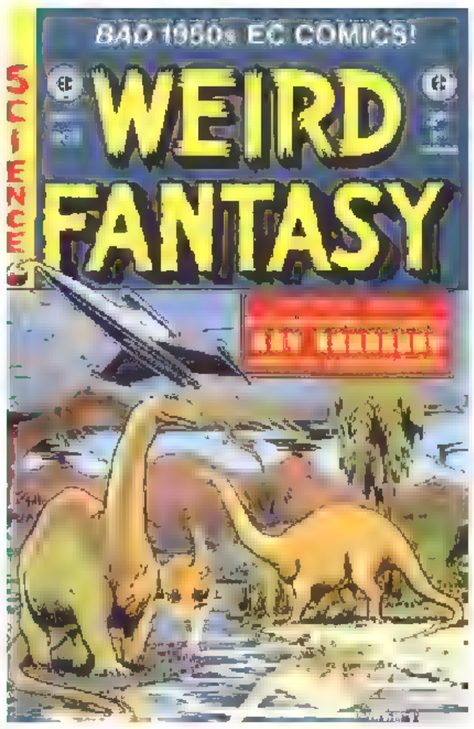
There is just one last thing left to convey before you need to hunt down **Appleseed**, something that is as big a part of the series as even Deunan and Briarios: the Landmate. It is difficult to describe landmates, which act as exo-skeletons, allowing the wearer to perform tasks such as lifting heavy objects. They are basically not-so-giant robots, and they are everywhere in the world in which **Appleseed** is set, even being used by the police and military. If you think of **Appleseed** as a hook, this is the barb that wouldn't let me go. Shirow manages to give the impression of weight, mobility, and power to these machines, increasing the ferocity and pace of the fights.

Currently there are four collected volumes and two additional **Data Books** available. All four volumes are currently available, thanks to Dark Horse obtaining the rights to take over publishing from the now defunct Eclipse; I have yet to replace my battered and faded copies of volumes 1 & 3, the books that hooked me over a decade ago.

Appleseed is intelligent sci-fi, that also ups the ante in terms of action. My advice? Let it hook you like it did me.

TRANSATLANTIC MEDITATIONS

Arnold T. Blumberg looks at why Sci Fi comics always seem to fail...



I READ Wake 3: Gearing Up recently, thanks to the efforts of NBM Publishing, a comicbook company that prides itself on releasing literate comicbook material, including plenty of reprints of European comics unfamiliar to us here in the United States. While they remain a niche publisher in an industry dominated (in this country anyway) by brightly colored tights and splash page fight sequences, they do an excellent job of providing an alternative to the head-bashing superhero genre with high-quality comics and graphic novels that give us a glimpse of what the rest of the world thinks comics can and should be.

To paraphrase a familiar adage, I'm not the most savvy reader of Euro-comics, but I know what I like. When I read Wake 3, created by Jean David Morvan and Philippe Bouchet, I was very pleasantly surprised. Here was a solid science fiction story without a hint of superhero bravado, filled with inventive characters, classic and not-so-classic SF situations, and a gripping narrative. The lead character is intriguing but certainly flawed, the artwork and coloring at times subtle and underplayed, and the pacing fluctuates when the story dictates. And wait a moment - does this comicbook actually stop to explore character motivation and deeper emotions? What's going on here?

What's going on is good storytelling, and American comics for the most part could use a lot more of it. Don't get me wrong - there are quite a few excellent comics here well worth reading from month to month, and despite our misgivings, a few of them are even (horrors!) superhero books. But if there's one literary genre that just can never seem to get a foothold in the American comicbook industry, it's science fiction.

Perhaps the reason is that, ultimately, American comicbooks are usually about the quick fix - that desperate search for instant gratification that has so defined our culture for decades. Perhaps that also explains why the superhero genre with its flashy colors, repetitive storytelling and fast-paced action sequences so perfectly suits us here in the States. It demands little of a reader intellectually, it serves up a heaping helping of spectacle, and it'll do the same thing all over again next month when you need it.

Good science fiction, by contrast, is often far more about character, intellectual exploration and philosophical themes than it is about spandex and crime-fighting. We tried to make it our own with *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, borrowing SF trappings but grafting them on to some very old western and World War II story elements and calling them SF epics. They weren't - they were fantasy, perhaps even "pulp sci-fi" excursions, but they sure weren't true SF.

In the European comicbook tradition, pacing is usually slower, character is often paramount, and the intelligence quotient is set just that much higher on average. And there you have a perfect set of parameters within which to tell solid, entertaining, and above all, enlightening science fiction stories. While we may not be able to replicate the approach too well here in the US, at the very least we can read more of it through the courtesy of the folks at NBM and similar publishers. We might even learn a thing or two.

This is not to say that attempts haven't been made, and occasionally they have paid off in quality if not in quantity and market share. In the 1950s, the infamous EC Comics even forged a partnership of sorts with SF author Ray Bradbury, adapting many of his short stories into superb comics stories in titles like Weird Science after "accidentally" publishing one such adaptation without his permission. The result was a series of Bradbury-scripted comics that offered one of the earliest - and *only* - examples of American science fiction comics that got it right. Character over spectacle, intellect over ray guns. No wonder they were dragged in front of a Senate subcommittee.

To be fair, that whole Senate thing was about something else entirely, but you see where I'm going with this. A few other stand-out attempts that come to mind were far more recent. In 1989, superhero purveyors Marvel Comics tried to enter the hard SF market with a superb bookshelf-format experiment dubbed Open Space. It was intended to bring more literate, intelligent SF storytelling to the comicbook medium with stories that would be written and drawn by a variety of creators but set within one cohesive shared universe. It was fascinating, well-structured, and eschewed gaudiness. It lasted only four issues.

Another one I recall is Harlan Ellison's Dream Corridor, an anthology published by Dark Horse Comics in 1995. It held on for five issues (with a special and trade paperback as well) and featured comicbook adaptations of Ellison stories in much the same way EC once adapted Bradbury stories. It was exciting, featuring a variety of artistic and narrative approaches, and it benefited from the talent of one of the world's most acclaimed storytellers. Comicbook fans ignored it and went straight for the latest X-Men adventure, and the Dream Corridor grew dusty with disuse.

So why exactly is this? As we've already discovered, in the US, science fiction and comicbooks are like oil and water. Unless you're talking about a licensed property like *Star Trek* or *Star Wars*, you're never going to make a go of it with an SF-themed comicbook series. And let's face it, even licensing a movie or TV property is no guarantee - look at what happened with Battlestar Galactica, or Dark Horse's Planet of the Apes movie tie-ins. Good intentions and dedicated creators sometimes just aren't enough.

NBM reprints of SF Euro-comics notwithstanding, there must be a way to make a good science fiction comicbook for the American market. You can rest assured that if I think of one, I'll be publishing SF comics in a heartbeat. In the meantime, I'm stocking up on more European graphic novels and wondering what might have been if the worlds of American comics and SF had enjoyed a more harmonious relationship for lo these many decades. Now let's see, another Wake volume... but where are all the laser guns and dive-bombing spaceships, goshdarnit?

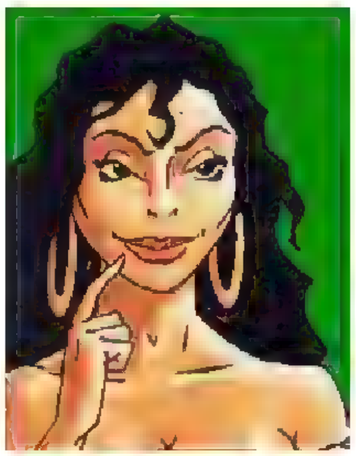
CONTINENTAL DRIFT

Kevin Schomburg continues his search for the perfect graphic albums from around the world...

Cape et de Crocs (Of Capes and Hooks) by Alain Ayroles and Jean-Luc Masbou.

This comic is the quite wonderful result of its creators' partnership in the development of a role playing game, entitled *Contes et Racontars* (Tales and Gossip), which was sadly never published. It follows the adventures of Don Lope de Villalobos and Don Armando de Maupertuis, two noblemen in 17th century Europe who are hunting for a lost treasure and meet some friends and many foes on their travels. Exciting swashbuckling action, love found and lost and found (and lost), intrigue, and cannon fights with pirates and ghost ships are all part of the story.

The spice in the narrative, however, is the hilarious dialogue, which ranges from tragic pathos to silly declarations of love, from hateful promises to mellifluous threats, all presented with just the right amount of ironic inflection necessary to keep that chuckle a constant reading companion.



Ayroles' vivid dialogue is presented within in equally potent visuals by companion Jean-Luc Masbou who applies an astounding depth and detail to his cartoony art, which actually makes you perceive the backgrounds as integral parts of the storytelling process. So many things go on behind the scenes and next to the actual action in a panel that it almost takes as much time to find all the little details as it does to read the foreground narrative.

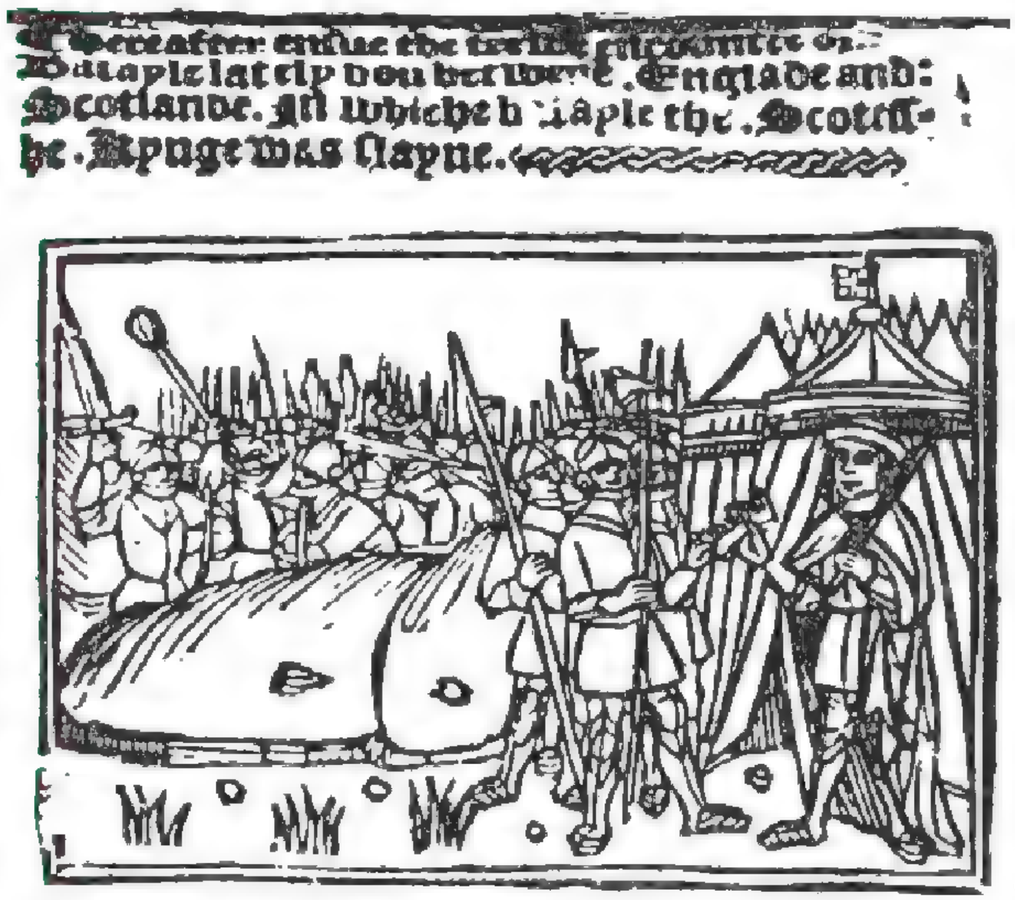
Speaking of storytelling, De Cape et de Crocs is a revelation to those who have always found it difficult to get their heads around the classic French tradition of panel-to-panel transitions, which is often tuned in on moods rather than on action sequences. Ayroles and Masbou's book is firmly grounded in a modern, American, action-oriented approach and the skill with which they execute it makes for thrilling reading indeed.

De Cape et de Crocs is a thoroughly enjoyable experience with skilfully employed dialogue and instantly appreciable art. If it were a movie it would be directed by Terry Gilliam, if a book Alexandre Dumas would be an obvious choice for an author and as a comic I would have to go for Goscinny and Uderzo – no, wait, hold that thought! Let's make that Ayroles and Masbou, because it can't possibly get better than it already is.

De Cape et de Crocs by Alain Ayroles and Jean-Luc Masbou has its fifth album scheduled for September 2002. It's published by Delcourt for £12.50. Danish, Dutch, German, and Italian editions are available. Start learning a foreign language today! Also available by Ayroles is Garulfo, the story of a sentient frog.

MILESTONES

Mike Kidson explores key moments in the history of comicbooks


Hereafter enſue the terrible ſtroke of
Bataple late vpon the borders of Englade and
Scotlande. wh whiche bataple the Scottiſ-
he kynge was ſlayne.

PRINTED books and papers weren't thought to be very high class at the beginning of the 16th century. They'd been around in Europe for almost half a century, prices were beginning to drop, elegant new type was being designed, and the academics had caught onto their potential for spreading new ideas much faster than had been possible before; as a result of which the Catholic world was about to run headlong into the Reformation. But in 1500 an aristocrat wanting to buy a luxurious new book was still likely to turn to a scrivener for a handwritten, colourfully illuminated volume, scorning the alternative of heavy, regular typefaces and simple black and white engravings.

Those simple black and white engravings, though, were a very important early milestone in the development of comics. Even today the majority of world comics consist of black and white outline art, sometimes with additional colour.Yet in the early 16th century, outline art was rather a novelty in Europe. Drawing had certainly been practiced for centuries, but the conventional medium for public pictorial art throughout the Middle Ages had been paint, in very large quantities and in a huge range of colours, each of which had their own symbolic meaning. Outline art required different techniques and approaches. As the use of it increased, spurred on by the fact that it was the only form of illustration technically suitable for printing alongside text, practices that still pervade modern comics soon emerged in the popular press.

In 1513 England and Scotland, then two separate enemy nations, were at war. England was in fact at war on two fronts; while Henry VIII was fighting the troops of the French King Louis XII, Louis' allies the Scots launched an invasion of England with the aim of diverting English troops away from the French front. In September the English and Scottish armies engaged in battle at Flodden Moor; the better-equipped English army won the day. A few days later news of the victory reached London. An enterprising printer, Richard Faques, rushed out a single sheet, folded to make a four page pamphlet, giving a brief account of the event. It was the first English newspaper. It also contained a single black and white illustration.

It's a striking piece of work, in several respects. One is that it's distinctly mediaeval in style; at the height of Renaissance realism, just one year after Michelangelo had completed painting the Sistine Chapel ceiling, it shows little grasp of perspective or proportion. More significantly, it shows how outline art was adapting not the current painterly realism but the old mediaeval symbolism. As the text immediately above it states, "at which battle the Scottish King was slain", yet at the right of the image we clearly see the King surrendering his crown to the victors. Outline art can never genuinely be "realistic", and in this early example we see emerging a harmony between non-realistic depiction and non-realistic content that is still employed in comics today.

It is unlikely that this woodcut was made specifically for the news pamphlet. It's a generic illustration of a king surrendering to a conquering army, of a kind that any early printer kept for use in the classical histories and epics which were among their stock in trade. That doesn't detract from its being symbolic in the readers' eyes rather than realistic - but it does suggest another connection with the early days of modern comics. In effect, Faques was probably an early practitioner of a tradition of recycling images which was to continue on through centuries of popular publishing, right down to the re-use of images made by Alfred Harmsworth when launching Comic Cuts (see Borderline #9).

The closest connection to comics of all, though, is that this image actually contains two pictures, in sequence, with a divider separating them. In the top left quarter the battle is shown taking place. In the right hand half the King surrenders to the victorious army. In the lower left quarter, above what was already a standard icon, for clumps of grass representing a field, is a curious, bulky object – it's quite impossible to make out what the artist intended it to resemble, if anything! Its purpose, though, can be easily understood by any comics reader; it unmistakably, if rather obtrusively, takes the role of the gutter between panels in separating the battle scene from the subsequent scene of capitulation.

Although it can be thought of as a comic in the modern sense, this pioneering "newspaper picture" from Richard Faques' equally pioneering news pamphlet does, I submit, show us that several of the important aspects of comics art, both in the aesthetic sense and in terms of production practice, were already in development almost 500 years ago!

THE BLANK PAGE

Chev's off again on something or other...

IT is said that a week is a long time in politics, and that the more things change the more they stay the same. The same could be true of comics.

It's been a funny year, all things considered. I had postulated that Marvel would deplete the pool of talent from independent comics, and that the *Spider-Man* movie might replace the need for comic books altogether. I was wrong, albeit gladly. Those creators now writing for Marvel have also managed to continue, by and large, to create the types of comics on which they made their names, while also subverting the standard Marvel superhero comic into something strangely different. And for every once-independent creator now working on Marvel comics, at least one has sprung up in their place in the indy market; I have found - and it has been a fruitful experience searching - a great many comics, all of them in genres infinitely more fulfilling than the superhero, on which to spend my money. Although it would have to be said that *Spider-Man* as a movie had a few things comics books lack, an intelligent plot and sensible dialogue were not among them, the irony of which - given how the real world views comics - is not at all lost on me.

But I also said that the Max Comics line would do nothing but swear and fuck pointlessly until realising that nobody was watching, and that censoring dialogue in self-regulated comics was the province of fools; so let's call it even.

Marvel is, at the moment, unlike at any other stage in its history, and generally unlike any other creator of mainstream comic books. The beautiful irony is that it is doing this by being at least a decade behind every other comic publisher.

Poaching talent from other markets is largely what DC can thank for currently being in the business of comics at all, having depleted the UK comic industry of its best creators fifteen years ago. In fact it's most of those same creators that Marvel has now taken from DC and who are producing Marvel's current output. Only Marvel could be so slow and yet make it all look so fresh.

Put it all down to spin: smoke and mirrors and, most of all, a bit of misdirection. Shout loud enough about **Amazing Spider-Man** doubling its sales figures and maybe nobody will notice you cancelling half-a-dozen low-selling clunkers that should never have seen print in the first place.

Yet for every unadvertised gem - putting Greg Rucka on **Elektra**, Milligan and Allred on **X-Force** - there's always a clunker that we can't fail to have heard about, such as **Origin**, which started incredibly well in a blaze of publicity so fierce that even normal people heard about it. And ended, months behind schedule, in a whimper so anticlimactic that we can only imagine Jenkins' original ending won't be seen until **Origin II** is unveiled in a similar blaze of publicity early next year. Why give the audience what it wants - and was led to believe it was getting - when you can fleece them twice for the privilege?

Marvel seems to have got around this inconvenience of disappointed readers, unhappy with product failing to live up to expectations, rather cleverly. Now Previews solicitations don't tell you anything about the comics you're buying, short of what they're called, how much they cost and, if Marvel even know at the time, who has written and drawn them - ingenious, really.

But what of the comics, and of those writers plucked from smaller companies and set to work on Marvel's characters? Well, I'm fairly sure none of them were kidnapped bodily from their homes to do so; and few are compromising their artistic integrity to work for hire on someone else's characters.

Writers, it should go without saying, are creative. Offer Greg Rucka the chance to write **Elektra** and he won't think about her dreadful costume and who she should fight first, but rather about industrial espionage and international assassination. Bendis doesn't fill **Daredevil** with outlandish heroics, but concentrates instead on the crime stories beneath the skin. And Grant Morrison quite naturally drops the **X-Men** into the sort of nightmarish otherworld that only ever exists in Grant Morrison comics.

At this time, nobody is even competing with Marvel in their own arena. Oni Press and Dark Horse are continuing to do their own thing, gloriously and rightly unconcerned that superheroes are what your average consumer wants from their comics. Image - and you may want to feel sorry for them here - are flailing in a pit of their own, with only the creators Jim Valentino has brought to the company giving them any respectability at all. And DC - that other great home of the All-American superhero - has almost entirely swapped roles with Marvel. Having lost its best creators to them, it now falls back on older creators like Mark Waid and Doug Moench to write its books, giving them an old-fashioned feel that is simply out of touch, especially in this New Age of Marvel Comics. Even new creators such as Geoff Johns and Phil Jimenez don't have that contemporary edge that is needed, making **The Flash** and **Wonder Woman** almost indistinguishable from how they read a decade ago. Compare this with someone like Bruce Jones, a veteran writer whose current work on **The Hulk** is as good as anything he ever wrote.

The lesson seems to be this: it is not the writers and artists you choose to work on your comics, it is what you give them to work with and how you allow them to do so. DC's heroes are archetypes, and they do not change. Marvel's heroes are people, and they change just as much as people do. It has taken Marvel too many years to realise this properly, and it may yet be too late. But Marvel is now staffed with ex-DC and Vertigo staff who cut their teeth on changing the face of comics, and now they have the ideal characters with which to do so.

Apart from Hawk-Owl and Zippy, obviously.

12 O'CLOCK LOCK

Editor of small press title The Girly Comic, Selina Lock joins the ranks of Borderline columnists with a look at the first thing that attracts or repels the purchaser: the packaging.

RECENTLY released in hardcover, Wonder Woman: The Hiketeia has sparked off a great deal of heated debate on the Internet, not because of the story, but because of its cover: a powerful image of Wonder Woman's boot squashing Batman's head into the ground. Some argue that this is sexist and fetishistic, cynically playing up the dominatrix angle to sell more books. Certainly, if the boot had been on the other foot, so to speak, there would be outrage that the most famous superheroine was being shown ground underfoot by a man. I know nothing about the Hiketeia storyline, so I can't comment on the relevance of the exterior to the story within. What I can surmise is that it is designed to be provocative and that Batman's presence on the cover will sell more copies than that of Wonder Woman. As I'm primarily not a superhero fan in any case, the cover would not entice me to pick up the book; I'm not interested in finding out how they've engineered yet another scenario pitting one hero against another.

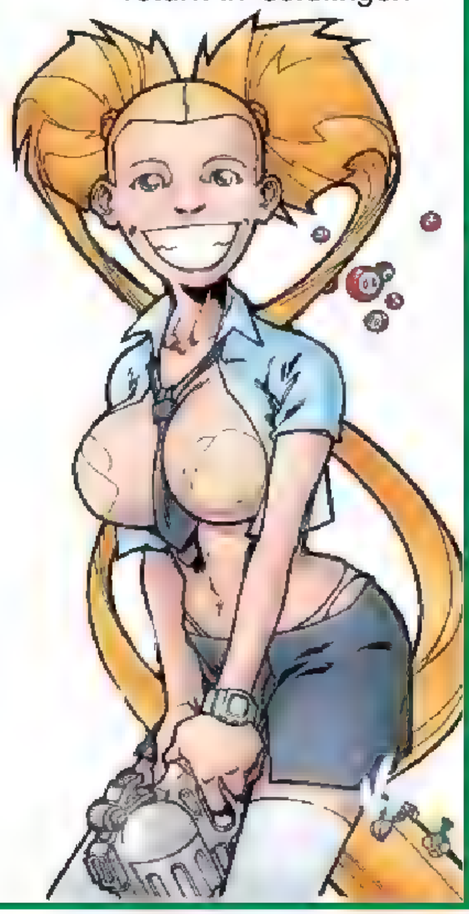
This got me thinking about comics covers in general, as they are one of the most important marketing tools at a publisher's disposal. Covers are important for books and magazines, but are often even more important for comics as they may be the only thing we can judge a comic on when standing in a comic shop scanning the shelves. It still seems to be the norm to display comics sealed in bags, with only the cover to indicate what the story might be about. I wouldn't buy a book without reading the blurb on the back or pick up a magazine without flipping through it to ensure it contained items of interest. So why should I pick up a comic on the strength of its cover, especially when covers are often by different artists to the interior art? The simple answer is I don't buy comics just because of their covers, as I tend to rely on recommendations instead. However, a cover can influence me to find out about a product or put me off it altogether.

When I'd only just been introduced to the medium, I was immediately drawn to Kabuki by the striking covers, and asked my partner what it was about and whether I might like it. Why? One reason is because I find oriental imagery interesting, but I also found the covers beautiful and intriguing. Why was this attractive woman scarred and wearing such an iconic mask? Another cover that intrigued me was Finder: Sin-Eater Volume 1, as this made me want to find out who the man sleeping in the statue's hand was, why he's sleeping there, and what the strange land in the background was. Also, the Blue Monday covers always seem nicely designed and contain characters that just suggest they are fun to read about.

Whereas the Bazooka Jules covers just produce a shiver of revulsion in me. It's probably unfair to single out Bazooka Jules for the crimes of a thousand other titles with big-breasted and scantily-clad heroines, since from having read the first 2 issues of Bazooka Jules, I see there is at least a reason for her having breasts the size of melons. However, I think the reason I dislike the Bazooka Jules covers so much, especially that of issue 1, is because she is shown in school uniform with plasters across her nipples. This image strikes me as being exploitative. The blonde pigtails and big grin are even more suggestive of innocence corrupted. I also have yet to see an Elektra or Vampirella cover that makes me wonder about the characters or what is happening in the story.

So, what makes a good cover for me? I think it has to make me ask questions about the comic or make me think about the comic. So all of the covers I've mentioned are good covers in a marketing sense as they have all made an impression on me and made me remember the comic. However, an enjoyable cover that makes me pick up a comic has to be beautiful, interesting or quirky and make me want to find out about the characters or stories it represents.

12 O'Clock Lock will return in Goldfinger.



MAN ON A MISSION

Martin Shipp's vision of a better comics industry takes a turn in the direction of book shops...

IT'S been said many times that the comicbook rarely if ever gets fair recognition as an artform. But does it get fair recognition for its influence on other artforms?

A month or two back I talked about the relationship between comics and books. Since then, I've been doing some more of that reading stuff, once again dipping a toe into the wide world of proper literature, purely for my own entertainment. And I'm surprised at what I've been running into.

We all know about the effect comics had on Michael Chabon; his award-winning **The Amazing Adventures Of Kavalier And Clay** is part history of comics, part love letter to them, part social history, part mystical adventure. There may even be an actual comic soon to be published, based on the fictional comics created by Chabon's fictional writer/artist team and featuring fictional adventures of fictional characters created by fictional characters, which is not only enormously confusing but is also one up on a plain old adaptation of Sherlock Holmes any day.

But anyway: the Guardian First Book Prize for 2002 was won, as we know, by Chris Ware's **Jimmy Corrigan**. One of the other books shortlisted for the prize was Glen David Gold's **Carter Beats The Devil** ("Addictive" - **The Guardian**; "Electrifying" - **The Independent**; "Extraordinary" - ***The Telegraph***. God, writing book reviews must be so easy if you only need to come up with one word). **Carter**, which coincidentally shares a publisher with Chabon's novel, is a fair enough book ("Thick" – **Borderline**), though to be honest it would have been nice if all the characters were *not* interconnected to such a degree. The kicker comes at the very end of the book - and don't worry, there's no need for spoilers - in a section entitled "Program Notes"; an afterword of thank yous and bibliography. There, among the BMWs, the arcane and the unfindable, is the following:

"Inspiration came from the unbeatable troika of genius storytellers: Stan Lee, Jack Kirby and Steve Ditko".

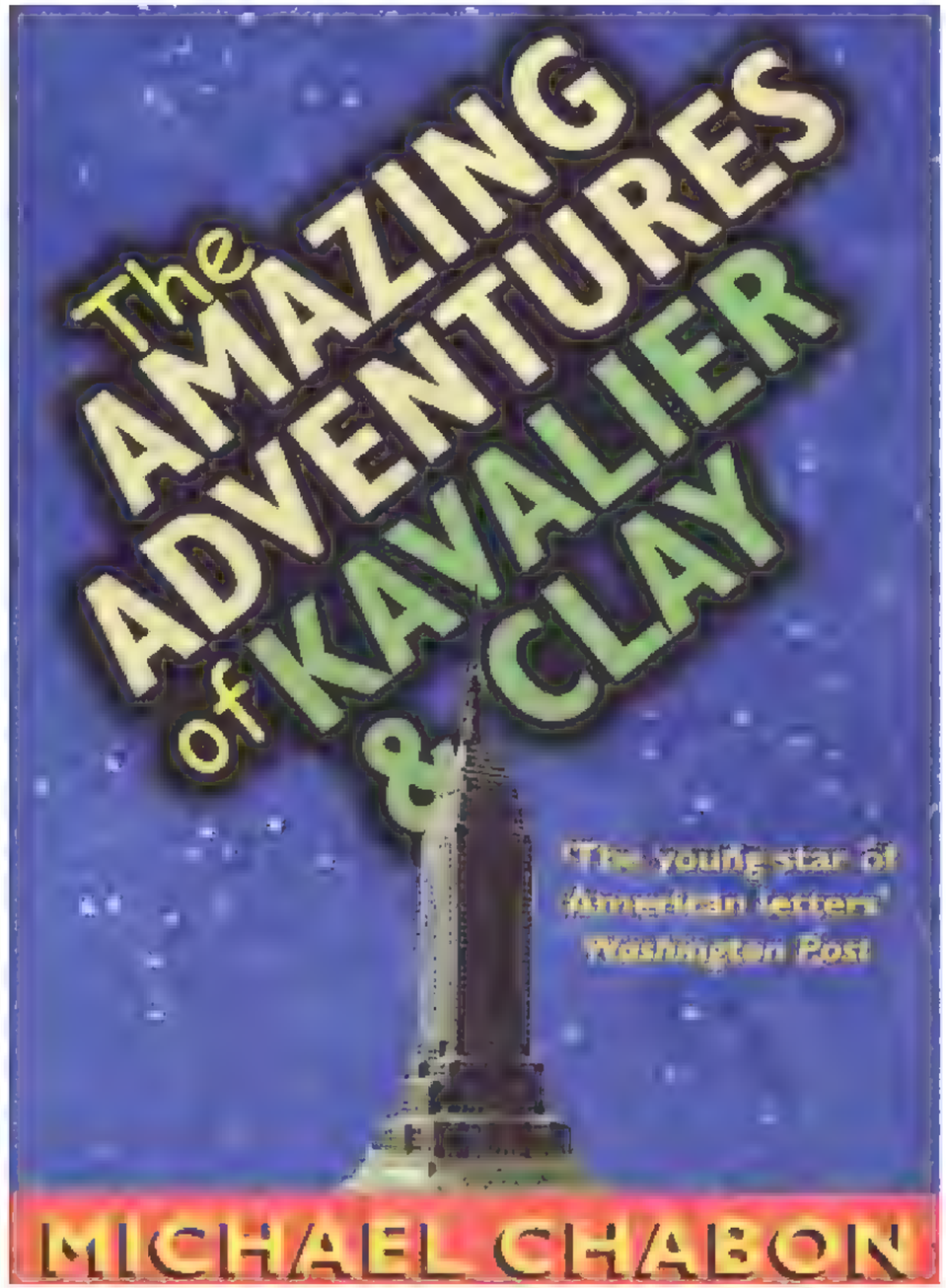
Meanwhile, over in the field of crime writing, there's Ian Rankin, creator of the **Inspector Rebus** books, a man so prolific he has to publish under two different names. Rankin is recognised as a modern master of crime writing, has won the Silver Dagger and is now seeing Rebus impersonated by the actor John Hannah on television screens. Rankin was, at one time at least, a devout follower of **Batman** and **Detective Comics**. I know this because he bought them from a comics shop I once managed, which is how I also know that despite the gruesome murders and bleak worldview portrayed in his books, Ian Rankin is a very pleasant chap indeed.

So these are three examples taken from contemporary literature; you can probably come up with half-a-dozen others of comics' influence on film or television by yourself. The underlying trend is that despite being treated as the ugly unwashed cousin, the comicbook is slowly and gently making its presence felt on other artforms simply because of its place in modern history. The authors and film-makers who are currently reaching maturity as artists are from the generation that grew up entranced by Kirby dots and Ditko philosophy. It's only natural that those formative experiences of wonder should underpin these artists' work.

The editor of this magazine holds a theory that all of the individual works of a certain author, from the shortest of short stories to the longest of blockbusters, whether they be set in some fantasy land or in the middle of New York City and whether they be written solo or in collaboration, are part of one enormous story, the full rich tapestry of which will one day soon be revealed. What would this be but the concept of the shared universe, a part of comics since the very first team-up, applied to a different medium? Who's to say that the author in question didn't pick up this trick (and we must note here the difference between the "shared universe" and the "serial" - several books set in the same place, such as Ed McBain's, or several books featuring the same character, such as McDonald Fraser's, are not the same as several books set in different places, times and possibly universes but sharing an underlying unity) from comics?

And eventually, can we hope that these respected creators will repay the medium that influenced them? Will Glen David Gold publicise his love of old Marvel Comics, of comics as an artform, and possibly lead the way to a reappraisal of his childhood influences? Don't get your hopes up: for every Gold, Chabon and Rankin there're a dozen equally respected creators willing to do the comicbook down.

But don't worry about them. We're having a whip-round and hiring Ang Lee's Hulk to go round and beat the crap out of them.



COMICS 2040

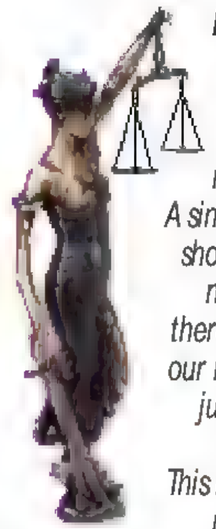
Paul Rainey - July 2002

WHY NO ONE LIKE HULK? HULK SO LONELY. MAKE HULK MAD!
LEAP
SMASH! CRASH! WALLOP!
SPECIAL CAMEO APPEAR-ANCE BY STAN LEE'S BRAIN !
WHY NO ONE LIKE HULK?

NHERE ARE WE NOW?
IT LOOKS LIKE WE'RE WALK-ING ONTO A RAILWAY PLAT-FORM
THIS MUST REPRESENT BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH
YES, THEN THIS MUST MEAN BLAH BLAH BLAH
BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH BLAH.
PICKLED ONION?
AH!
I'VE WASTED MY LIFE...

HOW OLD IS SPIDER-MAN?
WELL, I'M ULTIMATE SPIDER-MAN AND I'M FIFTEEN.
I'M THE ORIGINAL SPIDER-MAN AND I'M... WELL, I'M NOT ENTIRELY SURE HOW OLD I AM.
I'VE HAD LOTS OF ADVENTURES. I'VE WORKED FOR THE DAILY BUGLE AND I NOW TEACH CHILDREN ... SCIENCE I THINK.
I ALSO GOT MARRIED AND AM CURRENTLY SEPERATED FROM MY WIFE. SO, I GUESS I'M IN MY LATE TWENTIES.
SO, WHY DO YOU STILL WEAR THAT STUPID COSTUME?
WHAT?
I CAN UNDER-STAND A FIF-TEEN YEAR OLD WEARING THAT BUT A TWENTY NINE YEAR OLD?!
UM...
I MEAN, IT LEAVES NOTHING TO THE IMAGIN-ATION. I CAN SEE YOUR NADS! NO WONDER YOUR WIFE LEFT YOU!
HAVE I INTRODUCED YOU TO MY FRIEND, SUPER MAN?
UNDERPANTS
GREEN ARROW?
HOW DO YOU DO?
DAN ABNETT?
HEY!

VERDICT COMICS REVIEWS



Borderline's policy is that we don't mark a comic out of ten or some other archaic method of rating comics. A single comic or a series should be judged on a number of things, therefore we encourage our reviewers to make a judgement about a specific issue. This is why Borderline's review column is the best in comics!

THIS MONTH'S JURY:

David R. Booth (DRB)
Andrew Cheverton (AC)
Jenni Cole (JC)
Jay Eales (JE)
Kelvin Green (KG)
Kevin Hill (KH)
Rol Hirst (RH)
Mike Kidson (MK)
Andrew Luke (AL)
Steve Miller (SM)
Mike Sivier (MS)
Andy Winter (AW)

HAVE YOU GOT A VERDICT ON A BOOK? YES? THEN BORDERLINE WANTS YOU!
WOULD YOU LIKE TO JOIN OUR REVIEWS JURY? ALL YOU HAVE TO DO IS CONTACT ANDY WINTER:
reviews@borderline.mediahall.co.uk FOR DETAILS AND OUR GUIDELINES.

Avengers United #16
Marvel UK/Panini Comics
By various

This wonderfully priced anthology continues its very welcome reprints of Avengers Forever, although the exclusion of the original's annotations is somewhat strange. As part of this title's ongoing John Buscema tribute/retrospective, and tying in with last month's classic reprint as well as future episodes of Avengers Forever, the origin of the Vision is reprinted. *Even An Android Can Cry* is hailed as one of the best of the classic Avengers stories, but despite wonderful art from Buscema, it is rather crude in its execution. The plot is nothing more than a fight scene and some flashbacks, the equivalent of the dreaded "clips show" so common in US sitcoms. Given the hype surrounding its classic status, the story itself seems rather disappointing. Still, assuming you do not already own these stories, this remains a good purchase.
The Verdict: Still wonderful value, and a wonderful product, just a little disappointing this month. (KG)

Bastard Samurai 2
Image Comics
By Michael Avon Oeming & Miles Gunter + Kelsey Shannon

The smart people are calling this a quality product, yet I feel conned by it. The first issue did nothing, travelled very little distance and left me with a feeling of expectation. The second issue left me cold and with the feeling that this is an "all style and no substance" comic, full of provocative imagery, but with little sense of the story going anywhere... even though it does. "Vacuous" is too harsh a criticism for it, but perhaps "soulless" isn't. The Verdict: Just because something has potential doesn't mean you have to stick with it. (DRB)

Battle of the Planets #1
Top Cow
By Munier Sharrieff and Wilson Tortosa

There's one problem with buying this comic: I'm not going to be able to avoid giving away my age, am I? Lets face it, only one thing led anyone to pick this off the shelves - pure and simple nostalgia wank. I loved *Battle Of The Planets* (Or *G-Force*, as I remember it) when I was eight years old. Are there enough others like me to ensure its survival?

As long as they bought issue #1, the answer is probably "yes". It's not a hugely original concept, nor a particularly remarkable comic, but it's competent and enjoyable enough. The five members of G-Force appear to have at least rudimentary personalities beyond the bloke, the girl, the fat one, the little weird one and the other bloke (which is more than I ever remember them having in the cartoon) and there's a nice bit of government conspiracy to nudge the plot along. The art owes an odd debt to Neal Adams in the same way the cartoon did; there are lots of familiar supporting characters and situations I didn't realise I'd forgotten until they turned up like a weird faux manga Friends Reunited, and even fashion has come so full circle that stripy flares look cool again. I so wanted to be Princess when I was a kid. Enough to buy issue #2, anyway.
The Verdict: Less creepy than "School Disco". But where oh where was 7-Zark-7?! (JC)

Beautiful Killer #1
Black Bull
By Jimmy Palmiotti & Phil Noto

It helps to keep life interesting if you do something unlikely once in a while. Some folk go skydiving or backpacking in Thailand. I buy a comic written by a tracer and drawn by a cover artist, published by the fan monkeys who do *Wizard*. I live on the adrenaline.

It's quite good. There's this albino, Goth teenager with a rifle, and she plans to kill those agents who killed her parents, themselves both agents back in the '60s when the blokes looked like Sean Connery and the birds wore white lipstick. If this were actually funny, it would be Austin Powers; it's not, but that doesn't quite make it James Bond, although it does come close.

Palmiotti's script jumps between the present and past expertly, mostly due to Noto's faultless switching between contemporary and older art styles, the '60s artwork having pleasing resemblances to John Burns' work. The art is probably what will sell this, as it's fairly unique to the current market, and will appeal to older fans, as will the resolutely Bond-like slapping about of female agents and bloody yet well-deserved deaths of villains.
The Verdict: Very reminiscent both in the art and the writing of the '60s spy thriller, but with a contemporary companion story featuring a cute female Goth assassin. Who wouldn't buy it? (AC)

Defiance 3
Image Comics
By Douglass D. Barré & Kanno Kang + Zack Suh

The Image manga Vertigo book. This is a quality product that leaves you feeling both confused and slightly dirty after reading it. It's a bizarre hybrid of styles, blended with sexuality, horror, violence and some excellent, and innovative, visuals. This is a series that deserves to get more recognition than it has; another tip of the hat to Jim Valentino for attempting to bring something weird and different to the table.

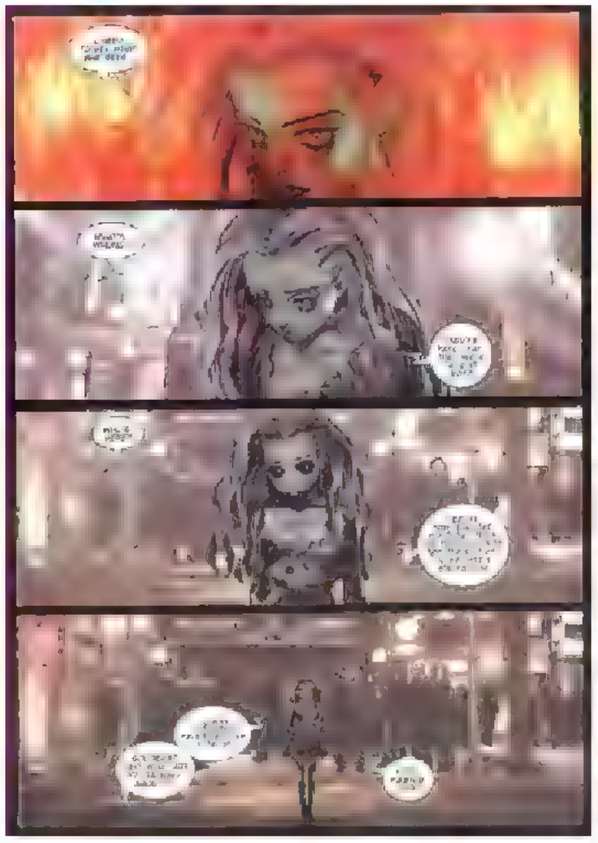
This issue, the story moves on and Ivan gets killed again, but not for long because Cleo is on hand to save the day. But even as these two "find" each other, events mean that Cleo's time is almost over.

There's a certain sophistication becoming apparent in this comic, like the creators are growing exponentially better every issue. The Verdict: A surprising package that has grown in depth over the last few months. A recommendation would be to pick up the previous issues before tackling it; the good news is that if you can find this comic, it shouldn't cost you much. (DRB)

Elektra: Glimpse & Echo #1
Marvel Knights
By Scott Morse

The Marvel revolution continues as yet another independent creator is lured to the fold to lend their magic to characters as far removed from their usual fare as it's likely to get. Yet that is what seems to be able to make it work.

Scott Morse plunges Elektra into a mystery, as a mysterious group of ninja lead her to a nightclub where she hears the story of a jazz trumpeter and his wayward son and the tragedy that split them apart. The ninja action is commonplace with this character, but the haunting back-story and its connotations to Elektra's own past linger in the tale.



The art is typical Morse and atypical Marvel, to their credit. Morse paints with shapes of colour laid over each other, like a Fuzzy Felt painting in oils, and his Elektra is at the same time blocky and angular yet slight and powerful, and always sexy. His use of colour is absolutely vivid, setting scenes with perfect tone and marking characters out from each other in similar fashion.

The Verdict: As a companion to the monthly Elektra, this adds much life and interest to an often one-note character; but the artwork marks it out as leagues ahead of the regular title. (AC)

Empty Zone: Conversations With The Dead #1
Sirius
By Jason Alexander

This new mini-series is a sequel to a previous run of Empty Zone (available now as a trade collection entitled Hopeless Beginnings), although it isn't strictly necessary to have read that before - I haven't and it didn't seem to hurt this story much. I shall be buying the previous trade, though, because

Captain America #3
Marvel Knights
By John Ney Rieber and John Cassaday

Captain America has a bad reputation around here. Cap'n Stinky, some call him. And rightly so, they say - he hasn't been treated right since the 1960s, unless you count the three issues by Steranko or the all-too-brief Roger Stern/John Byrne run of around 1980. Sanctimonious. Preachy. Boring, I suppose. The character became a way for a whole country to contemplate its philosophical navel, only to find they were lacking in metaphorical lint. In that way, one might say this story is little different from the vast majority of those it follows, but let's look at some of the themes:

The US military-industrial complex employing American citizens - implying those citizens' tacit complicity in American military adventures abroad. Use of children as terrorist agents. Mutilation of children in war zones by weaponry belonging to either side.

That's in just the first few pages!

"This is America," says Cap. "We don't make war on children." But the thrust of the story puts the lie to his words, and it's obvious from Rieber's writing that Cap knows it too. Witness Faysal Al Tariq (the nominal villain)'s response: "Who sowed death in their fields – and left it for the innocent to harvest? Who took their hands? Their feet?"

It's hard for this reviewer not to become emotionally involved in an issue like this, having visited Bosnia shortly after that country's struggle for survival had eased.

The place was riddled with landmines. Every day you could look up to the hills and see teams of minesweepers digging up the latest explosives. And every day you could look down the street and see people who had discovered landmines the hard way. Leaning on their crutches.

It's a clever bit of writing, here. It sows the seed of doubt in the reader's mind. Let's look at some other themes: Denial of the fact that they are involved in the arms trade by members of the American workforce: "Components... We make components."

Al-Tariq's denial that he is a terrorist.

Use of 'spin' to colour the perceptions of the media-guzzling masses. "When Americans die – it's an atrocity," says Al-Tariq. "But when we die – we are 'collateral damage'."

Responsibility. Is it right for a whole nation to be blamed for the actions of soldiers on a battlefield? That's the question on which the story hinges. Rieber's resolution is inventive. Cap chooses to accept personal responsibility for the death of Al-Tariq, rather than allow it to be used by another such man to incite further hatred against America as a whole. But this is a thorny matter and I hope it will be explored further, in upcoming issues of this title.

Anyone who thinks the most notable part of this comic was Captain America revealing his identity on international television needs to grow up.

The Verdict: It's a rare thing to read a comic that asks you to think for yourself. This new run of CA might have started as a slow burner, but on this evidence it could heat up fast. (MS)

this is excellent stuff.

Corinne appears to have had a rough time recently, which has affected her ability to work and left her with hallucinations of dead friends coming back to haunt her. Except maybe there are people out to hurt her...

This is SF, and has a basic guide to the world in which it is set in a page of notes at the back. They're fine as they go, but the story reads perfectly well without those also. It's a testament to the storytelling to be able to say that, and I don't imagine I'll say it often. Characters are introduced quickly and sketched out through situation and dialogue rather than exposition, meaning the story continues a pace without slowing down to bring all readers up to speed.

Alexander's art is quick and sketchy in a Kent Williams, Brian Wood sort of fashion, and the artist isn't afraid to use plenty of panels per page, either in the action sequences or the talking head sections. The action is frenetic, making this a fast paced, dense introduction to what promises to be an excellent ride.

The Verdict: Character based SF with an action edge and enough mystery to pique the interest and keep the reader guessing. (AC)

Fade From Blue 2
Second2Some Studios
By Myatt Murphy
& Scott Dalrymple

Cheap and intelligent – what more do you want from a comic? $1.50 reminds me of a time when comics were still expensive but at least you got more than three, plus loose change, for ten bucks!

FFB at the moment is a dialogue driven thing, a story of four intelligent, attractive and slightly neurotic half-sisters with the same (spy) father and four decidedly different mothers that still has enough intrigue and subplot to keep action/adventure fans occupied. I still think Marit (the cop sister) looks and feels just like a guy, despite some very hilarious talking heads pages set in a clap clinic. Dalrymple's art continues to impress and the entire package (albeit in b&w - but what do you expect for $1.50?) is quite remarkable and deserves to be supported by the comics buying masses.

The Verdict: Quite possibly the most entertaining and value-for-money package available in good comic shops. (DRB)

Gen 13 #0
Wild Storm
By Chris Claremont
and Ale Garza

Wild Storm Phase III kicks off with a special, 13-cent issue of the imprint's teen title, a handy jumping on point for any new readers or, as in my case, a jumping back on point for lapsed ones. Shame it's not any good.

In some respects, Gen 13 was a victim of its own success. The Jim Lee-created universe has done its best over the 10 years of its existence to ensure that its characters do age and develop, and in the case of its junior squad, this has necessitated occasional major line-up changes as characters stutter towards their early 20s.

With most of the original incumbents killed off and their bland successors retired, the new batch of persecuted superkids seems dull and derivative, while Claremont's turgid prose is almost a parody of itself. There were some back-ups as well, but I didn't get that far, having

received an overall impression that Gen 13 has really had its day. Ah well, at least it only cost 20p.

The Verdict: Cheap, but not cheerful. Hard to believe, but this comic really isn't worth the price of admission. (JC)

Hip Flask: Unnatural Selection
Active Images
By Richard Starkings +
Joe Casey and Ladronn

For a comic based on a character created for Comicraft adverts, this doesn't suck as badly as you might imagine.

The script (collaborated on by all three creators) is at least functional and at best comprehensive in its telling of the origin of Hip Flask, a genetically reared hippo/human hybrid from an illegal science program who is freed, along with similar experimental companions, into the world when the base is raided by the authorities. That's actually it for this issue. But that summing up doesn't due justice to the sheer artistry of Ladronn's illustrations, fully painted in an incredibly detailed, European

The Filth #2
Vertigo
By Grant Morrison and
Chris Weston

My first thought after reading issue one of this series was that Morrison was going to write a series about binmen. After reading this issue, I am still not sure that he's not doing that, but at least this time we're given some small explanation for the strangeness.

Although it's too early to say for sure, it would seem that Morrison is playing this one for laughs. The Invisibles was strange, but it was serious at its core. The Filth, by contrast, seems to be a more light-hearted affair, and it would also seem to be working. As an extreme example of the old "hapless Englishman in an unfamiliar situation" routine, it works splendidly, due in part to excellent art from Chris Weston and Gary Erskine, as well as the writer's perversely fertile imagination. The plot is as unfathomable as you might expect at this early stage but there are enough hints to make you continue reading this very, very odd but strangely absorbing comic.

The Verdict: It's weird, it's deep, but it's also really, really funny. You have to read this now, as I reckon it's going to get really wild and you won't want to miss it. (KG)

Defying expectation and description has been a staple of Morrison's work for many years now. Just when you think that he's become a pedlar of mainstream superheroes of incredibly variable quality, he turns around and unleashes The Filth on your head.

The Filth are the people who put reality back together; like Sapphire and Steel crossed with Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band. Here the world is under threat by a nanotech virus, looking like toddlers gene-spliced with Teletubbies. But it's hardly relevant to the madness of identity and reality that the back story provides, leading the reader through it all using a member of The Filth who doesn't remember being anything other than a dull, masturbating member of normal society.

Applause must be given to Chris Weston. It can't be easy receiving a script from Grant Morrison when he's in this sort of mood, but he faithfully draws every minute detail of this madness, making it real enough that we can at least stand some chance of understanding just what sort of world we're entering here.

The Verdict: If Grant Morrison isn't insane, he bloody well should be by now. I imagine Chris Weston will soon be joining him. (AC)

manner that is absolutely sumptuous.

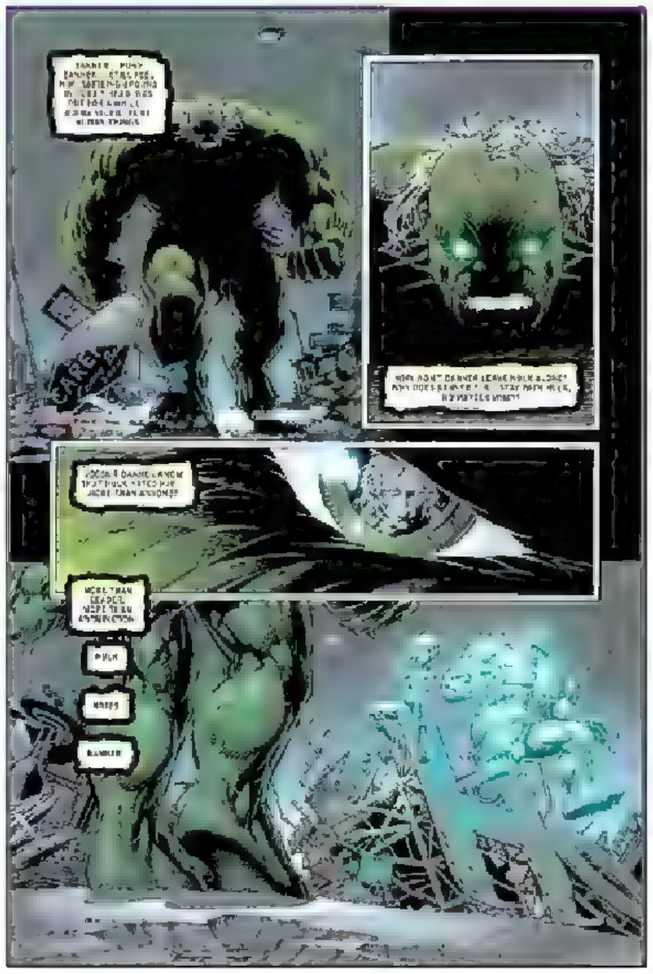
It's a shame that the whole thing is over in one issue. The thirty years of story here aren't really served by the single-issue format, leading to a lack of anything to feel about the animal characters and their human creators beyond simple empathy and revulsion. Perhaps the growing personality of Hip Flask will be explored in next year's The Big Here & The Long Now miniseries. I'm sufficiently interested to find out more.

The Verdict: A simple origin tale, aided immensely by quite beautiful artwork that supports the script where sometimes it fails. (AC)

Incredible Hulk: The End
Marvel
By Peter David and Dale Keown

Reuniting the team of David and Keown, this is the tale of the final days of the Hulk, in a desolate future where mankind has been obliterated from the face of the Earth, leaving Hulk with nobody but puny Banner to talk to. Watched by a dispassionate alien monitor, Banner walks the American continent, dying but unable to die, alone but not truly alone.

And it's actually quite moving. Shorn of an *Elseworlds* type cop-out, the reader is able to actually take the story as gospel, which helps the gravitas no end, particularly in the hands of a master storyteller like David. He makes the pain of Banner's final days real, filled with nothing to live for, yet unable to die naturally as long as the indestructible form of the Hulk lives within him. You can take it as a parable for euthanasia, or a treatise on schizophrenia or, simply, as the final story of Bruce



Banner and the Hulk, and it's to the creators' credit that it works on that many levels.

The Verdict: A fitting coda, not only to David's and Keown's run on The Incredible Hulk, but to the series as a whole. (AC)

Judge Dredd: Megazine #4.13
Rebellion
By various

Behind an unimaginative cover, the monthly anthology produces a strong issue. The final part of the *Citizen Kane*-inspired *Dredd* feature offers a surprisingly poignant and heartfelt conclusion, making it one of the stronger strips this month. New strip *The Bendatti Vendetta* starts off in an interesting way, with plenty of juicy mysteries being hinted at along with top artwork from John Burns. Unfortunately the name is a bit crap, but these things happen. If this series can live up to the promise of its first chapter, then it could become a classic.

Despite John Ridgway's excellent art, *Missionary Man* ends in an underwhelming fashion, although the last couple of pages hint at some interesting developments in the strip's future. This month's *Durham Red* tale is an improvement on the last if only because it actually has something to do with one of the character's previous incarnations. *Bad Company* drags itself out of a rut with some interesting musings on death and the environment, effectively conveyed by suitably gritty art and some haunting writing.

Finally, the reprints of *Hellboy* continue to impress, although there could be more pages of this quirky adventure tale. Both of the article slots this month are focused on *Rogue Trooper*, but variety has been successfully traded in for quality, and both articles are very interesting reads.

All in all, the good strips show up the weaker strips as merely filler, but the good outweighs the bad once again in this strong anthology.

The Verdict: This is a well-balanced anthology, but stronger quality control would make it truly great. (KG)

Marvel Mangaverse #4
Marvel
By Kevin Gunstone and Ben Dunn

At long last, the Mangaverse incarnation of Doctor Doom makes his appearance, and it is every bit as impressive as expected, as Doom commences to do something quite shocking. Although his actions are a little too villainous for my liking here, it is good to see Doom finally live up to potential and actually win. The manga redesign is quite effective, particularly his new mask, although the body of the famous armour now has an almost feminine look. Otherwise, Ben Dunn's art is as glorious as ever, particularly Doom's explosive entrance. Kevin Gunstone, along with Dunn, writes a good story here, with some adept characterisation, as well as what may be some well-observed comment on the current political climate in the real world.

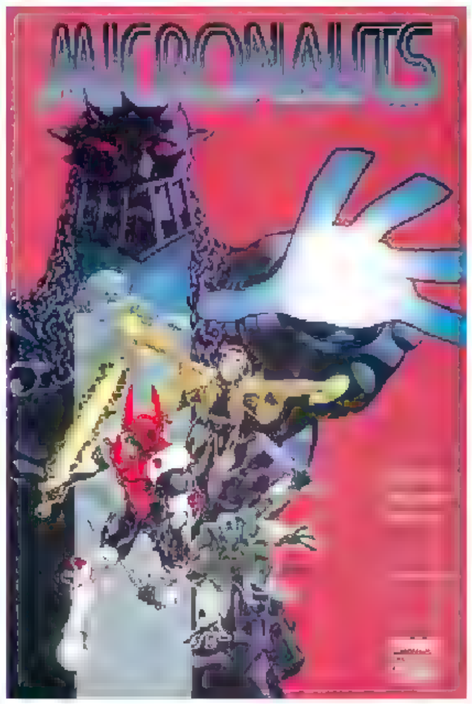
If there is a flaw to this comic, it is in Doom's attitude. He seems too villainous here, and although he gives justification for his actions, it is diluted somewhat by what may be editorial tampering. Rather than coming across as a desperate but noble man forced into diabolical acts, he seems to be something of a psychopath who happens to have a political agenda. This allows him to be treated as a normal villain, and disposed of cleanly at this arc's end, rather than with questions about whether he is right. It is uncertain whether this is due to editorial tampering or not, but there is a sense in the writing of pulling back, or being forced back, from seeing Doom in a sympathetic light. As such, it would not be surprising to see Doom be beaten by the world's heroes in future issues - but it would be a shame.

The Verdict: Apart from a certain reluctance to go "all the way", this issue is the realisation of something that should have happened in the standard Marvel Universe years ago. Wonderful. (KG)

Micronauts 1
Image
Scott Wherle & Eric Wolfe Hanson + Barbara Schulz

Oh God.

This is wrong. This is so very, very



wrong. In my wildest dreams I never believed I'd be praying for Bill Mantlo's Micronauts. Dire is a compliment.
The Verdict: Image has no quality control. I'd like to offer my services and they can pay me all the money I'd save them in paper costs. I'd also get to feel good about saving trees from this fate worse than pulping... (DRB)

Noble Causes #4
Image
By Jay Faerber and Patrick Gleason + Sean Clauretie

The conclusion to the first storyline and also this run, as the series re-launches in October with the first in a series of hopefully continuing miniseries. I say hopefully, because sales on this haven't exactly gone through the roof, which is a shame as it has some highly compelling plotting, well-realised characters and the sort of sheer exuberance that mainstream comics seem to have forgotten.

It wears its soap opera ambitions on its sleeve, but where most superhero comics lose their plots in a labyrinth of complexity, Noble Causes – being its own continuity – steers its course smoothly. And it's the characters cheating on each other, arguing together and falling mysteriously pregnant that have lifted this above the other standard comic operas such as The Flash and The Fantastic Four, because it weaves them those plot threads with aplomb and affords the space they need, instead of crowding every page with fight scenes.

Do try and pick up Noble Causes: Family Secrets in October, because if nobody else buys this I may never find out who the father of Zephyr's baby is.
The Verdict: Something I never thought I'd buy, much less look forward to: a soap opera superhero comic written by somebody who didn't write independent or Vertigo comics before this. (AC)

100% #2
Vertigo
By Paul Pope

This is science fiction in the style of Richard Calder and Alastair Reynolds, who are very contemporary authors in the field and far from traditional. It's easier to make such comparisons with authors, because there's very little in mainstream comics to which Pope's work can be likened. His worlds are vivid and real and soaked in futuristic detail and then - so rare in any medium - shoved to the background where they rightly belong, so that the plot and the characters can take centre stage.

There are three stories in 100%, and they may or may not collide and coincide. But they will thrill and intrigue you, because they are your stories, things you have done or might have done, or may yet still do. There are strippers whose internal organs are scanned and projected live onto the stage around them. Why? Because, if such technology existed, people would pay to see that. That's what makes science fiction so much fun.

Pope's art has been grey-toned, and it's a superb decision. The layers of perspective are now more apparent than before, lending an immediacy to the storytelling that it sometimes did not achieve before, when Pope would crowd detail into every panel. He still does that, but no longer to the detriment of the pace, and this is a pacy story.

Stormwatch:
Team Achilles #1
Wild Storm
By Micha Ian Wright & Whilce Portacio

Another Wild Storm relaunch, this one hits the mark pretty accurately.

Ever since James Robinson changed Wild C.A.T.S.' supporting cast member Ben Santini from a one dimensional by-the-book military cypher to the Wild Storm universe's cooler, deeper Nick Fury, the character has been crying out for his own title. And now he's got it...

As a whole, from the basic concept to the art it's something of a return to traditional values after the brief detour into Grant Morrison-induced über-violent edginess of The Authority - the book that grew out of the ashes of Stormwatch's first incarnation. It also brings Stormwatch back to basics as a government agency, there to troubleshoot problems caused by the aliens and the super powered beings who regularly get in the way of Joe Public, this time by the surprisingly clever twist of making Stormwatch not only non-superheroes themselves, but human agents who actively dislike "superfucks" and, like many of the ordinary men in the street, see them as a pain in the arse who just get in everyone else's way. It's one of those concepts you find it hard to believe no one has really thought to exploit before. Henry Gyrich would love 'em.

The action is fast paced, violent and bloody, interspersed with snappy dialogue that even manages to get in a few gentle pokes at parent company DC. It's good fun that knows its limits and never worries about trying to be pretentious or knowing, the way comics aimed at 12-year-old boys should.
The Verdict: Big guns and ultra violence, but if that's what you want this won't see you wrong. (JC)

The Verdict: Modern, hip thoughtful SF, something long lost to American comics but evident in spades here. (AC)

Powers #21
Image
By Brian Michael Bendis and Michael Avon Oeming

"Brand New Story Arc!" screams the cover blurb. What it should more accurately say is, "Brand New Story Arc – Same As The First Story Arc!" Maybe I'm just too cynical; for all I know Bendis might have a good reason for retelling his own stories. Like he's thought of a proper ending this time around.

And yet I'm still here, buying every new issue of Powers. Why? Well, I'm glad you asked, because I'll tell you why. Bendis is the single best writer of comics we have ever had. He's more consistent and reliable, more accessible and contemporary than anyone that's ever written comics for a mainstream American audience in history. Nobody does everything that Bendis does with aplomb: not Alan Moore or Stan Lee or Neil Gaiman, or anyone else you may care to name.

What Bendis cannot do, however, is plot, or even cleanly resolve what plot he can manage. Which kind of fucks the whole enterprise up somewhat, I think you'll agree.
The Verdict: There's nothing to criticise in this issue at all, other than the firm, definite feeling that it's all once again going to add up to nothing in the end. (AC)

Spider-Man/Black Cat:
The Evil That Men Do #1
Marvel
By Kevin Smith and Terry Dodson

By George, I think he's got it. It's

been a long time since Smith didn't coast on his reputation - and that only amongst comics geeks - and created something not only worthy of his time, but also of ours.

This is shorn of the word count overkill that deadened Daredevil, and the fanboy indulgences that mired Green Arrow. Instead we get an intelligently plotted, well-characterised story that builds the two plotlines cleverly until the climax when Spidey and the Black Cat finally meet. Certainly the pop culture references grate annoyingly, making the genuinely funny ones less amusing by the time you get to them, and Smith's tendency to over-explain these gags is condescending. And if I was unaware that Felicia Hardy had sizeable breasts before this comic, I'm certainly more than aware of it now, thank you very much.

There is an odd moment where Spidey gets shot at on a wall and the bullets hit around him with "Bang! Bang!" sound effects. I was under the impression that the guns went "Bang!" and the bullets went "P-Taaang!" or "Ke-owww!" but that might just be me.

Terry and Rachel Dodson do a fine job, providing solid and beautifully inked work that has a restrained, yet colourful palette that adds to the art rather than swamping it. Certainly, Terry Dodson wishes he were Adam Hughes (and he's not the only one), but that's not such a bad thing.

And I'll bet you didn't know about the size of Felicia Hardy's breasts, did you?

The Verdict: A fine start, with plot in full swing and visuals actually worth looking at, in an interesting story told well. (AC)

Transformers Armada #1
Dreamwave
By Chris Sarracini and James Raiz

Well, this is much better! As Dreamwave's take on the classic Transformers continues to disappoint, the release of their first (probably contractually obliged) toy tie-ins surprises by actually being quite good. Even more surprising is the fact that the same writer is responsible for both. Part of this title's strength is the art of James Raiz, which gives the characters a more elegant and natural look than Pat Lee manages over in the Generation One title. There is more of a sense here that these characters are naturally occurring, albeit mechanical, life forms rather than artificial automata.

However, the main strength lies in the writing, notably the highly effective characterisations. This series presents a truly new start to the Transformers mythos, rather than the reboot of Generation One, as we are introduced to a new and different world and characters. It seems as if Sarracini is perhaps hampered on the classic title by having to put words into the mouths of iconic characters, whereas here he is given the freedom to develop new characterisations and relationships - and the book is all the better for it! Sarracini also benefits as his strengths come to the fore. He is shown to be an adept writer of characters and situations, as he turns what is quite frankly a highly dubious idea for a toy into a highly interesting comment on the social rifts between the strong and the weak, and the responsibilities of both to each other.

Characterisation is also strong as the weaker, smaller Mini-Cons are developed. The other characters are left on the sidelines, barely sketched out, as this first issue focuses mainly on the Mini-Cons. This is something of a weakness, but it is worth noting that Sarracini gives them great depth of character, despite the fact that they are likely to be bit-players in upcoming issues. They are given a sense of individuality and defiance in the face of stronger predators, rather than a feeling of inferiority, or worse, cuteness. This makes us care more for them than we might have if they were not given so much "screen time" in this issue.

The creative team also manages to convey a strong sense of tension throughout the comic, culminating in the appearance of an all-new Megatron. There is also a palpable sense of horror concerning the fate of the captured Mini-Cons, which adds to the effectiveness of this comic.

If this comic has weaknesses, they are few. Little actually happens, and the supposedly main characters are only fleetingly introduced, but given that this is only the first issue, as well as the fact that it still works, such flaws can be overlooked in the short term. There are a few panels where the art looks a little odd, and there are some moments when the storytelling is a little unclear. However, on the whole the art team does a very good job, and this book certainly looks better than its companion.

The Verdict: Actually rather good, and if a small number of niggling flaws can be sorted out, it could be *very* good. (KG)

Transformers Generation One #4
Dreamwave
By Chris Sarracini and Pat Lee

This is an improvement. Just. This issue gives us something of an explanation for Megatron's "silver mud" plan, but Grimlock's change of allegiance is still unconvincing, and becomes more so as the issue goes on. The plotting, too is also rather uninspired, as the characters lurch from one fight scene to another while an incoherent subplot flounders in the background. On the plus side, there is some rather effective humour at some points, although it is somewhat strange that all of the jokes in this series so far have been concerning, or directed at, the same character. Also a plus is the welcome absence of the overblown dialogue of previous issues, replaced with more natural seeming speech patterns.

The art is rapidly deteriorating, with Pat Lee's visuals going from the gorgeous and perfect representations in all the previews to this issue, with giant robots made to look like inflatable toys, all balloon-like limbs and puffy torsos. There are also a number of visual goofs, with characters changing size and position every now and then.

The strongest part of this issue, sadly, is the introduction of the aforementioned subplot. It is badly paced, and lacking in detail in an annoying rather than mysterious way, but still manages, by virtue of not being a fight scene, to be the most refreshing part of the book.

The Verdict: Better than the

previous issue, but that doesn't say much! (KG)

Vertigo Pop: Tokyo #1
Vertigo
By Jonathan Vankin and Seth Fisher

There's something truly bizarre about this comic, but I'm not sure what. It might be the fact that none of the characters appear to have any noses. It might also be that, in exploring and exploiting stereotypes, Vankin appears to have accurately captured a snapshot of Japanese society from a Westerner's point of view. The art looks amazing, regardless of the lack of noses, with each panel capturing a level of detail that I'm sure Geoff Darrow would be proud of. The story rarely stops, but doesn't make the mistake of out-pacing itself, neatly introducing the characters and the weird world in which they live. The Verdict: Pop culture Tokyo style - as weird and wonderful as it sounds. (KH)

VERDICT COLLECTED EDITION

The Authority: Earth Inferno and Other Stories
Wildstorm
By Mark Millar, Chris Weston, Frank Quitely and various

We all know the problems that befell this title in the story arc immediately following this one. But before the loss of artist Frank Quitely, the resulting delays, the substandard fill-in story, the controversial censoring and the final cancellation of the title, the rot was already starting to set in. Mark Millar's first arc was quite effective in looking at superheroes from a different angle. However, here Millar seems to have been trying, and failing, to do the big-budget movie style superheroics that Warren Ellis and Bryan Hitch did so well.

There are some excellent ideas here, such as a renegade Doctor, and the Earth itself turning against its inhabitants, but they are hindered by glaring plot holes and a plot resolution that attempts to be clever and unexpected but comes across as sentimental and twee, a feeling completely out of place in this hard-edged series.

Chris Weston provides fill-in art for the first half of the main story, and does a disappointing job. His art is usually very attractive indeed, but here his figurework becomes lumpy and occasionally he produces some truly bizarre panels. His second chapter is an improvement, but it is still very good to have Quitely return to illustrate the second half of the story. He produces some excellent visuals, including an evocative double-page spread of refugees leaving Earth, and the usual bloody fight scenes. Nonetheless, this is a disappointing story arc.

Making up the space are reprints of various Authority one-shots, specials and guest appearances. Unfortunately, most are rather underwhelming, with only Warren Ellis' Jack Hawksmoor solo story being of any real quality. Paul Jenkins, Georges Jeanty and Karl Story give us a tale that shows an extra side to the Engineer's character, but one that is at odds with the regular series' portrayal of the character. The art is very good, and there are a couple of good jokes, but the story as a whole is little more than filler.

The worst of the lot is Joe Casey's one-shot, reprinted from Wildstorm's *Devil's Night* crossover event. Casey shows a basic misunderstanding of the Authority concept, giving us what is essentially a JLA story, but with zombies. The dialogue is heavy-handed when it is not trying (and failing) to appear mysterious, and the plot is badly paced and occasionally nonsensical. Cully Hamner provides attractive, blocky art, but it fails to fit the subject matter. Otherwise, the most worthy aspect of this story is Casey's bungled attempt to link it with an episode of Warren Ellis' Planetary.

Cully Hamner pops up again drawing Ellis' short story, the best section of the whole book. This is a Jack Hawksmoor monologue which sets out what the Authority is and what they stand for. It is done very well, and Hamner seems more suited to this story.

It is just a shame that the other writers in this collection did not study Ellis' contribution here, as it provides a clear insight into how to write The Authority, a lesson they all seem to need.

The Verdict: The beginning of the end for this title, and a great shame considering its mighty beginnings. For Authority completists only, I'm afraid. (KG)

Edge #2-3
CrossGen
By various

It's CrossGen Crossover Craziness in these two issues of the chunky anthology, as everyone turns up in everyone else's strips. Fortunately, it works a little better than it does in Forge #3, since the strips here are not as entertaining as those in the aforementioned companion, and crossovers add some much-needed spice. Sigil and especially the painfully dull The First benefit greatly from the links that are revealed between them and other strips, but only the pointless Mystic suffers, as Scion and the ever-excellent Ruse fare well without the need for crossover-induced plot twists.

Scion continues to retread every fantasy cliché under the sun, but the competent writing manages to create some tension as the plot begins to pick up. The Sherlock Holmes-esque antics of Ruse continue to impress, with the art team producing absolutely beautiful work and Mark Waid delivering an intricate and exciting script full of mysteries, tension and humour, with a superb cliffhanger ending. How he can write this well here and yet produce the uninspiring superheroes-in-disguise of Crux (as featured in Forge) is a mystery indeed.

As mentioned, The First looks a little more interesting than usual, but only due to its links with other strips, rather than any "internal" happenings. Of all the strips collected in both CrossGen anthologies, The First is the most frustrating, as it is never more than tedious and yet it occupies an important place in the CrossGen universe. Both Mystic and Sigil, especially the former, somehow fail to impress despite having good creative teams. This is a shame, as they are both full of good ideas which are merely flawed in their execution and, as Scion shows, improvement in these average strips can be achieved.

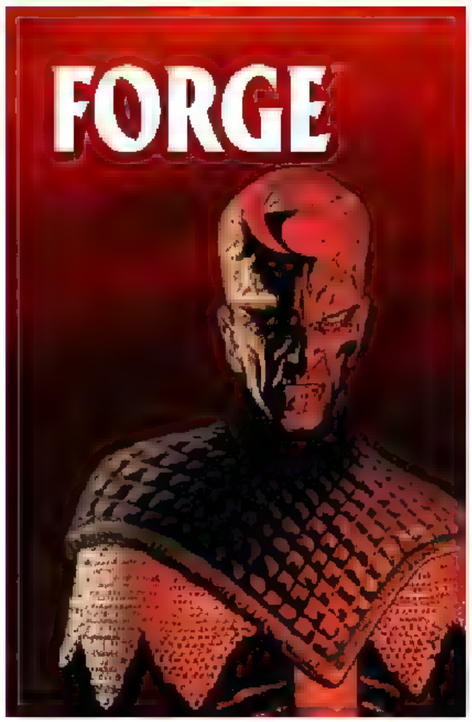
Volume 3 showcases what is either editorial laziness or cynical profiteering, as a story from Forge is reprinted. Since it is a spin-off from Sigil, it *is* more fitting here, but if the aim of the anthologies is to give the reader the whole CrossGen universe all at once, it seems redundant to print the same story twice. Since many readers will most likely get

both books, this seems like an exercise in wasted space.

So, Edge underperforms in comparison with its companion title. It seems like CrossGen have bundled their weaker strips with their strongest, the superb Ruse, in the hope that readers will stick with the underachieving strips. Were it not for the fact that there are signs of improvement in the weaker strips, a better purchase would be to get Ruse and the unfortunately essential The First in their monthly forms. However much this title has improved, there is still quite a way to go before it can match the quality of Forge.

The Verdict: Pretty essential for fans of the CrossGen continuity, but too hit-and-miss for others with only Ruse truly shining. Forge is much better. (KG)

Forge #4
CrossGen
By various



The price goes up this issue, but a nicely designed cover and some thrilling strips make this book worth its price. As with recent issues of Edge, links become apparent between the various stories in this collection, and there are some nice indications of possible future continuity revelations. Fans of the CrossGen continuity should find much to enjoy here.

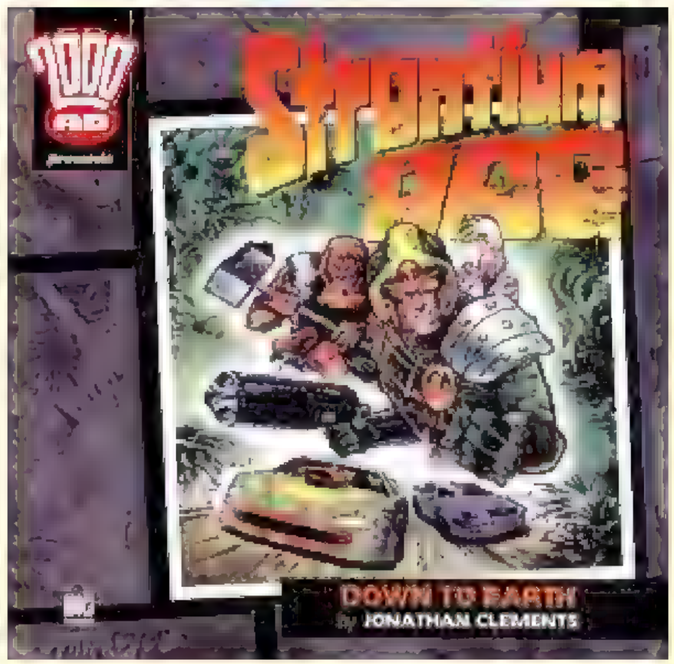
Sojourn is this month's sole disappointment, with only one uneventful chapter reprinted. Crux surprises by being quite interesting this month, although this is due to a lengthy but well-done fight scene and a bizarre time travel twist rather than any real improvement in the writing. It is almost as if these elements have been shoehorned into the story in a desperate attempt to create interest. Luckily for the Crux creative team, it works this time.

Meridian continues to be inoffensively bland, but while it will never be a highlight of CrossGen's output it does have a considerably redeeming charm, no doubt partly due to the excellent and unusual art. Negation provides a thrilling read, with some exciting developments maintaining reader interest, although the ending, while trying to create mystery, actually makes next month's plot twist rather obvious and predictable. Nonetheless, Negation remains one of the better CrossGen universe strips.

It is The Path which is this month's strongest strip, however. The art is wonderful, with an understated and limited colour palette, and a dramatic sense of panel composition. The subtlety is also evident in the writing, which has an intriguing calmness to it. This creates an effective contrast when moments of action occur, particularly one macabre scene from the first of this month's chapters.

Rounding off the collection is the second part of the rather pointless Sigil spin-off, which will probably also turn up in Edge; and a preview for the upcoming martial arts series Way Of The Rat, which looks very competent but may be a case of CrossGen spreading themselves and their ideas too thinly. The new series is billed to appear in Edge, Forge's sister title, which will undoubtedly improve that disappointing collection, but it does beg the question of why it is previewed here. On the whole, however, this issue of Forge scores another success for CrossGen's trade paperback experiment.

The Verdict: A strong anthology, ranging from above average to the astounding quality of strips like Negation and The Path. Well worth the price. (KG)



2000AD Presents #3: Strontium Dog: Down To Earth
Big Finish Productions
Written by Jonathan Clements;
Directed by John Ainsworth

A change of pace here, after the two Judge Dredd audio plays launching Big Finish's 2000AD-inspired range of CD adventures. If Dredd's roots are in the *Dirty Harry*/*Death Race 2000* mould, Johnny Alpha, mutant bounty hunter, is very much cut from the same cloth as Sergio Leone's spaghetti western hero, The Man With No Name. Perhaps that's why I had difficulty initially visualising Simon Pegg, star of one of my favourite TV shows, *Spaced*, in the role of the laconic Search/Destroy Agent. Even though I *know* the character is supposed to be English, I've never seen him that way, because of the strong western flavour of the strip, with its frontier justice scenario, so Pegg's performance seemed a little jarring until I adjusted.

That caveat aside, I have no hesitation in proclaiming Down To Earth the best of the series to date. Clements, a newcomer to writing the character, nails it immediately. It would have been so easy for the whole thing to descend into farce, with characters such as the time-displaced Viking, Wulf Sternhammer, the lumpy-headed Scots mutie Middenface McNulty (whose broad dialect can sometimes be indecipherable in the strips) and comedy alien furball the Gronk, but excellent performances all round keep things away from parody. Clements wisely plays it straight, allowing the humour to appear naturally through the storytelling, rather than imposing it, or relying on comedy accents. With *Blake's 7*'s Servalan, actress Jacqueline Pearce, as the villain of the piece (what else!), how could it fail?

The story concerns Alpha's search for his kidnapped partner, making him return to his old stomping grounds, Earth. Times are lean for the bounty hunters, and when a mysterious patron puts a bounty on Wulf's head, a double-dealing S/D Agent called Sick Squid turns him in for the money.

Clements manages to introduce a lot of the strip's backstory over the course of an hour, without excessive info-dumping. The norms' hatred of mutants is expressed neatly by a couple of Earthbound police officers – a scenario very much in vogue at the moment with the *X-Men* movie and revitalised comics, of course.

The Verdict: Clements brings the world of Strontium Dog to living, breathing life, and makes it seem effortless. Encore! (JE)

Garlands of Moonlight
Shoto Press
By Jai Sen and Rizky Wasisto Edi

Every so often a comic comes along that breathes fresh life into our often repetitive reading habits and really reminds us what a vital, subtle and affecting medium this can be. Garlands of Moonlight is definitely one of those rare delights.

In a way, this story didn't so much stun me with its originality as remind me of a similarly refreshing discovery made some 20 years ago; Gilbert Hernandez' early *Heartbreak Soup* tales in Love and Rockets. Marsiti, the herbalist and midwife "wise woman" in Jai Sen's narrative parallels Beto's Sheriff Chelo, and the island village she protects lies on the same cusp of tradition and modernity as Chelo's domain of Palomar. Sen's work, though, is not an imitation, nor does it ultimately follow a similar pattern; rather, both authors draw upon similar folkloric roots and filter their material through the mode of "magic realism", perhaps demonstrating that the deeper one digs into age-old cultural tradition, the more one uncovers a "global village" with a consistency and significance beyond anything that can be established by mass media. That both storytellers oppose Instinct – the "wise women" - and Reason – the Americans in Palomar, the village teacher here – and suggest that Reason is wrong may seem unsettling to some; this reader finds it delightful.

Upon these broad similarities and even broader concepts, Sen etches out a narrative of action and reaction in fine, sure strokes; within a couple of pages of little action one's sympathies are engaged with Marsiti, and yet her "opponent", the teacher Hidayat, is no unthinking, unsympathetic demagogue. The true skill of the narrative lies in how it deals with types, but makes people of them; neither heroes nor villains, just people who are both good and bad. To go into any more detail would be to deprive you of the pleasure of watching the story unfold; suffice it to say that the unfolding is achieved with immaculate pacing, until it reaches an unexpected but fully comprehensible conclusion.

And I haven't even mentioned the art yet! Edi's use of silver ink is fascinating; it blends with the solid blacks and subtle black linework, substituting for cross hatching and shading to soften the harsh impact of pure black and white and arrive at something like a soft synthesis of metal engraving and woodcut. It adds an otherworldly atmosphere to the proceedings. But the most powerful thing about the clear, transparent visual storytelling may be the way Edi uses techniques which in the West are associated with Manga, and by using them underscores the importance of a device which in Manga is often formularised out of existence; those big eyes, for instance, are big because the iconic approach they stem from is intended to emphasise instinctive feeling and emotion, not the reasoned action and reaction which underpin Western comics. Again we see Instinct and Reason opposed; that opposition really is the heart of this work.

That's why you should read it. You can buy it online via a link at *www.shotopress.com*, it costs only $4.95 for a ninety page novel of style, grace and beauty. If you love comics, you really cannot afford to miss this.

The Verdict: A remarkable, spirit-raising achievement that will remind you all over again why you read comics. (MK)

Incredible Hulk: Return Of The Monster
Marvel
By Bruce Jones, John Romita Jr. and Tom Palmer

Nowadays, it's easier than ever before to quit the regular monthly comics fix and graduate to trade paperbacks. You get a complete chunk of story, no commercial interruptions, and - now that Marvel has brought its prices down - you even save a few pennies with the collection. The only catch - occasionally, you have to take a risk. For example, since its Byrne-fuelled re-launch a few years ago The Incredible Hulk has been very patchy. Great art, average stories... nobody seemed to know what to do with Old Greenskin anymore. You won't have been able to miss the Hulk-sized hoo-hah surrounding Bruce Jones' arrival on the book, but is it really worth shelling out on this collection? Maybe you should dip your toe in the water and try a random issue first?

No. If you have, or have ever had, the slightest interest in the Hulk and you haven't been following the title recently, buy this trade. Bruce Jones is crafting a complex conspiracy thriller, and you really need to read it from the beginning. It starts slowly - comparisons to the Bill Bixby TV show are only accurate in that Banner is on the run, cross-country, trying to clear his name - but soon develops into an exciting yet thoughtful adventure, full of twists. Jones wisely concentrates on the man rather than the monster, and

respects his audience's intelligence (the closest comparison being JMS's current run on Amazing Spider-Man, also superbly illustrated by the never-better JRJR). Where most other writers would have brought in the Avengers to capture Banner by now (how many times have we seen that?), Jones keeps the comicbook stuff low key... so when it does arrive, it's even more of a thrill – and a surprise.

The Verdict: 21st Century Hulk is here. (RH)

JSA: Darkness Falls
DC
By Geoff Johns, David Goyer, Stephen Sadowksi, Michael Bair, Marcos Martin and Buzz

There are, apparently, still readers who don't want their super-teams muddling up with post-modern jiggery-pokery. They want their heroes heroic, their villains villainous, and their plots... well, simple. Well, JSA is probably the book for them; a large, rotating (i.e. they come and go with very little introduction) cast of morally unambiguous (or one-dimensional?) superfolk fighting bad guys who really do just want to take over the world.

In this second collection, Marvel Family nemesis Black Adam shows up for a fight, only to be defeated by an ingenious mix of time travel, lightning bolt and right hook; Kobra hijacks a plane, killing Atom Smasher's mum and delaying the publication of this volume by ten months in the process; and the JSA finally get some revenge on Hank Hall a.k.a. Hawk a.k.a. Extant for making a summer crossover cull of their membership back in Armageddon 2001. If all this means very little to you, don't expect the writers to explain it - or any of their own dangling plot-threads either. Maybe, with such a large cast, they're just as confused as the readers?

Inevitably, the best stories here

focus on just one or two characters - Wildcat against the new Injustice Gang; Black Canary and Dr. Midnite on the run from shadow demons. The rest is just colourful costumes clashing (in both story and art).

Finally, that old trade paperback bugbear... Alan Davis' amazing covers - why reduce them to 1/3 of a page? The Verdict: Lots and lots and lots of heroes and villains fighting to save - or conquer/end - the world. Nothing more, nothing less. (RH)

Murder Mysteries
Dark Horse
By Neil Gaiman and P. Craig Russell

Gaimanites - your prayers have been answered! It's Sandman #76 – drawn by P. Craig Russell to boot! OK, so old tall, dark and dreamlike doesn't actually appear this issue - but that's not the first time, is it? Never mind, everything else is just the way you want it.

Murder Mysteries is classic Neil Gaiman. There's a framing device involving a creepy romance and a mysterious stranger who spouts pseudo-profound gubbins like, "Stories always used to be good payment. These days – not so much." Then there's the central fable, full of angels, crystal cities, the creation of the universe – the usual stuff. It's here that the quirky Gaiman viewpoint runs riot, when the angel in charge of creating love is brutally murdered (!). An angelic Columbo investigates and it all ties together rather cleverly, if you can stomach all the metaphors and meaningfulness. Unfortunately, the ordinary humans tend to be a lot more interesting than the supernaturals. But to compensate for that, P. Craig Russell (who adapts this from an original Gaiman prose story) pulls out all the stops in the heavenly sequences, producing some of the most beautiful artwork of his career.

The Verdict: Gaiman fans will be in heaven (sorry!), but the people at Vertigo must be kicking themselves for letting this one slip to Dark Horse. (RH)

The Names Of Magic
Vertigo
By Dylan Horrocks & Richard Case

With Harry Potter cornering the market in boy magicians it was about time DC got around to updating Tim Hunter, if only to distance him from J.K. Rowling's lawyers. A shame then that, for all the extra leeway given to Vertigo creators in terms of adult (and adolescent) themes, Tim's "growing up" remains a largely family-audience-friendly affair.

"You're a spoilt, miserable, self-obsessed little brat with no respect for his elders and betters," one character remarks here – but compared to most his age, Tim is still a goody-two-shoes swot with little interest in the overriding teen obsessions of sex and drugs (though he does at least get a bit of rock 'n' roll in this book).

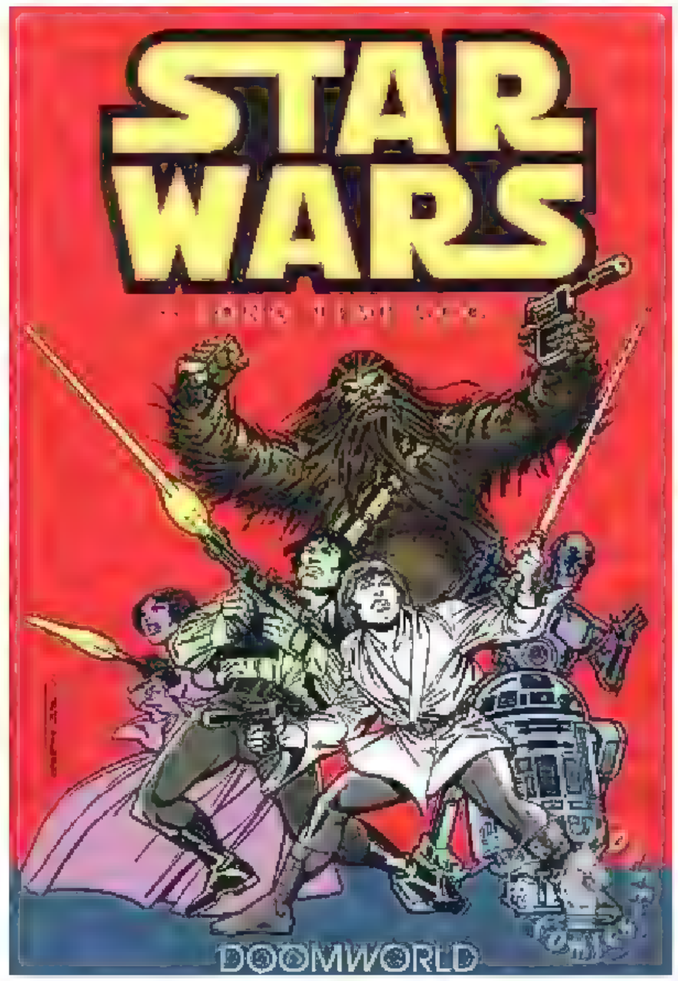
That said, Dylan Horrocks weaves an exciting yarn as Tim searches for the truth behind his conflicting origin stories, leading to a pleasingly unexpected resolution. Mixing *Matrix*-style conspiracy types with the usual Faerie bad-muthas works well too, and it's great to see Richard Case back on a book like this, with shades of his old Doom Patrol style creeping back through. The Verdict: A step up from the Vertigo-by-numbers Books Of Magic, though whether it's enough to pull Tim out of Harry's shadow remains to be seen. (RH)

100 Bullets: A Foregone Tomorrow
Vertigo
By Brian Azzarello & Eduardo Risso

The fourth 100 Bullets collection picks up speed after the slower end to Volume 3. Finally, Brian Azzarello begins to provide answers about Agent Graves, Mr. Shepherd and the Minutemen, tying them together in a labyrinthine plot that appears to go back centuries. It's still unclear just who, if anyone, is on the side of the angels in all this; Azzarello's worldview isn't black and white, but black and blacker. That's not to say there aren't good guys here (though they're mostly background players), or bad guys capable of good deeds... Prejudging these characters would be a mistake, they often take the plot in unpredictable directions.

Eduardo Risso consistently delivers top dollar art, whether the story takes us to grotty, rat-infested drug dens, dirt and tumbleweed border towns or luxurious Atlantic City casinos. He's a hugely inventive artist, using darkness, reflections and background detail to add a cinematic richness and unexpected beauty to these grim, dead-end lives. Issue #25 includes spot art from the likes of Frank Miller, Jim Lee and J.G. Jones... but they're all in Risso's shadow.

The script remains shiv-sharp, and if Azzarello occasionally falls too much in love with the sound of his own street-speak, or lets a plot ramble off in an unnecessary direction... well, those are the times when you really need to pay closer attention. He's probably sneaking in another clue, surprise or twist, right under your nose. After all, any writer who, after all these conspiracy-loving years, can still deliver a new and original take on the old JFK assassination chestnut has to be worth watching. The Verdict: Watch the shadows and the backgrounds - the real devils are in the details of the gorgeously illustrated noir. (RH)



Star Wars: A Long Time Ago... Volume 1: Doomworld / Volume 2: Dark Encounters
Dark Horse
By Roy Thomas, Archie Goodwin, Howard Chaykin, Carmine Infantino and others

Reprinting Marvel's Star Wars comic in its entirety from *A New Hope* to just before *The Empire Strikes Back*, these are essential reading for those who grew up on the originals. Dark Horse has done a lovely job here - bulky volumes similar to Marvel's Essentials line, but fully re-coloured and on much nicer paper. Obviously they're a bit more expensive, but compared to the similarly priced black and white Akira volumes these are still great value.

The original adaptation stands up very well, with Roy Thomas lifting large chunks of Lucas' script word-for-word (hey, it's Shakespeare

compared to *AOTC*!), and Howard Chaykin managing to capture strong likenesses and keep the massive fx action sequences from falling flat on the page.

It's surprising how many liberties Marvel took after the adaptation. Either Lucasfilm didn't exercise the same ironclad grip over its properties back then as it does now, or George really was making it all up as he went along and didn't really care what Marvel were doing. Han settling up with a very un-sluglike Jabba The Hut (sic) is just one of many ways in which this breaks from the official mythology, but only the most anal of continuity freaks will let this spoil their enjoyment.

Archie Goodwin captured the characters perfectly and plotted a much more exciting yarn than... certain filmmakers seem capable of these days. Chaykin soon handed over to Carmine Infantino whose looser style may be an acquired taste to younger fans, though you certainly won't find it given such a lush presentation, or such a high profile selection of inkers (including Terry Austin and Gene Day) anywhere else. There's also guest work from Walt Simonson, Michael Golden and Chris Claremont, among others.
The Verdict: Nostalgic wish fulfilment for long-time *Star Wars* fans. (RH)

Tank Girl Volume Two
Titan Books
By Alan Martin and Jamie Hewlett

And so here's the second volume of Titan's very welcome reprinting of this iconic 90s series. It's getting into its stride now, and settling into something of a rhythm, albeit an anarchic one. This is pure comics hedonism as Tank Girl, her friends and even her creators engage copiously in what the British call "having a laugh". There is no structure or sense to this comic, but it is nonetheless nothing less than fun. Creators Hewlett and Martin throw in any idea they come up with and play with it until the fun runs out, but rather than appearing indulgent, the sense of wild anarchic enjoyment is infectious. Despite this anarchic, almost incoherent style, development and improvement in both writing and art are evident. The art in particular is much improved over earlier stories, as Hewlett experiments with other styles and, when working in his usual Tank Girl style, eases up on the slightly heavy-handed and murky inking and produces clearer, more colourful art. Of interest to British readers will be the fascinating way in which this comic echoes the time period of its birth. Anyone who lived through the 1990s in the UK will feel a sense of pleasant nostalgia as rave culture, Take That, and other elements of the era are thrown prominently into the mix. This dates the strip, but in the sense that it comes across as a crazy kind of period piece, rather than a relic.
The only possible problem with this comic is that its carefree hedonism may not have been able to sustain itself much further. As a taste of something different from "proper" comics it is very refreshing, but even so the lack of depth may become tiresome to some readers. As it stands so far, however, this is a highly enjoyable comic that is well worth the asking price.
The Verdict: This is one of the most enjoyable and unique humour comics that has ever been printed anywhere. (KG)

MANGA

Angelic Layer Vol.1
Tokyopop
By Clamp

The second Clamp series to get the *100% Authentic* treatment from Tokyopop is a markedly different style of story to that of the other series, *Chobits*. Proving they are capable of pretty much any genre or style, this story is effectively Clamp's take on Pokemon – well, actually, that's a lie, it's more like the series Medabots, but you're more likely to have heard of Pokemon!

Rather than training little creatures, Angelic Layer features a new sport where humans control robotic "Angels" in fights - something the star of this book, Misaki Suzuhara, wants to be able to do. Unlike the leads of Pokemon and Medabots, Misaki is actually a nicely written kid, being enthusiastic, cheerful, friendly, and not even slightly bratty.

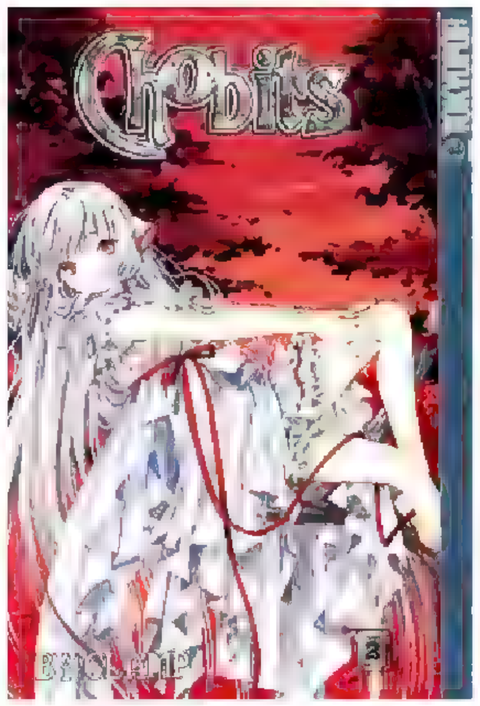
There's little in this book that isn't fun; the story is simple but effective and backed up with more lovely Clamp art, though this time the ladies of Clamp are using a more fun, comedic, style, with little use of shading, and some chunky blacks. What with this and the price of the book, it couldn't be more worth purchasing - particularly for kids of any age.
The Verdict: Pokemon + Clamp = a gloriously fun story. (KH)

Astro Boy Vol.4
Dark Horse Comics
By Osamu Tezuka

There's something endearing about this comic. I'm not entirely sure if it's the whole retro-chic thing, or whether it's just that these are good and, most importantly, fun adventure comics. While it's understandably sci-fi in nature, Tezuka mixes in a large dose of morality tales, with some heartrending moments, and villains who you can truly love to hate.
The Verdict: Continuously fun comics from Japan's master story-teller. (KH)

Initial D Vol. 3
By Shuichi Shigeno
Chobits Vol.2
By Clamp
GTO Vol.3
By Tohru Fujisawa
All Tokyopop

So, a volume or two on, and where are they at? Initial D is still proving a boy racer's dream, featuring amazing artwork on the motors involved, plus background stories of romance, rivalry and stupidity. While the book actually appears to be going nowhere, it still retains an element of drama that prevents it from becoming just another boys' story.



Chobits could also quite easily be viewed as another boys' story, but thanks to the all-woman team that is Clamp, it's nothing of the sort. Sentimental, witty, and intelligent, with thoughts that border on the metaphysical, Chobits is unique. It is still impossible to dislike male lead Hideki, as he's still chivalrous and gentlemanly, wanting only the best for others, but hoping to gain something - or someone - good for himself. Of the truly, well, *nice* moments in the book, what springs to mind the most are the excerpts from a fictional – as in made up by Clamp – picture book called "A City With No People" that provides a wonderful view of love from a very alternate point of view.

GTO is an unclassifiable book if ever there was one. Onizuka is still part pervert, part teacher, and all conviction, taking control of a class made up of the more undesirable elements of his new school. It's difficult to describe what makes this book so interesting, but it could be the need to see what will be the next thing to happen to Onizuka, or what he might do next. You just never know, but throughout this book, and the previous volumes, you're sure that he'll be using his heart – and that's what makes him such a likeable character.
The Verdict: Three different books, but all maintaining a high standard, and all necessary purchases for the discerning reader. (KH)

Medabots Vol.1:
A Boy And His 'Bot
Viz
By Horumarin

Based on the computer game and cartoon, Medabots follows the adventures of Ikki - I kid you not –

and his Medabot, Metabee. Medabots are toy robots used to "robattle" against other Medabots, although Ikki's robot is far more outspoken and mischievous than is usual...

The story is fine, sort of following that of the cartoon; the only problem is that the artwork, while obviously meant for kids, is a tad too simplistic. This leaves much of the action appearing too slow, with little use of the speed-lines we've come to expect from Japanese artists.

The Verdict: A book best left for kids and fans of the cartoon. (KH)

Priest Vol.1
Tokyopop
By Min-Woo Hyung

This book is perfect for being made into a film. It's a Western, you see, but a Western with a twist. The clergyman of the title is on a mission given to him by the devil to whom he has sold his soul. Cue huge gunfights with undead creatures, and a gun-toting priest

with the air of Eastwood and the Duke. The stylised artwork is reminiscent of Mignola's - in fact, the priest's devil looks uncannily like Mignola's Rasputin from Hellboy - but contains enough of a twist to retain its own unique look, proving ideal for the gunfight scenes that plague the story. I think I've worked out why this hasn't, to my knowledge, been picked up by Hollywood: it's a Korean comic little known in the West.

The Verdict: God bless Tokyopop for injecting some unusual life into their line-up. (KH)

Ragnarok Vol.1
Tokyopop
By Myung-Jn Lee

Joining Tokyopop's quickly expanding line-up is this Korean comic, a fantasy epic which takes its title, and many of its characters, from Norse mythology. A lot happens within this volume's 180 or so pages, with action and comedy throughout. Visually Lee's work is similar to Japanese art, sharing many of the same traits such as high-speed action scenes, and more cartoon-like panels to help the more comedic moments out.

The only real criticisms that can be levelled at the book are its introduction of a vast array of characters, and its occasional lack of originality - you know, mysterious swordsmen, perky heroines, thieves etc.

The Verdict: By no means a waste of time, but nevertheless not a must-have. (KH)

Storm Riders Vol.1
ComicsOne
By Wing Shing Ma

From the outside, the production values of this book are

impressive. It's a shame, however, that yet again this book succumbs to the poor quality of editing evident in many of ComicsOne's releases, with some pages proving difficult to understand.

But this is a welcome return to comics that bring the kinetic style of martial arts movies to the printed page, even in this compromised format. The story, that of a young martial artist named Nie-Fong, is marred only by the excessive use of descriptive boxes that seem intent on telling you exactly what is happening in the panel — whether these were in place in the original I don't know, but they prevent the story from flowing quite as well as it could. Where Storm Riders does not fail is in the artwork, which, if the descriptions are ignored, almost seems alive.

The Verdict: Glorious Hong Kong comics, let down by sloppy editing. (KH)

ZINE SEEN

Eastwest
£2 from Toby Gerard Parson, No.1 St. Mary's Road, B. Hill, W. Sussex, RH15 8NU, UK

Released six months ago, Toby Gerard Parson's picturebook examines the events of September 11th and also the many aspects preceding and following it. Belief, communication, distance and travel, fear and anger... this collection of images is stimulating and induces return viewing compulsively. Another clue that the sequential art of comics really can achieve so much.

Unless this has gone beyond first printing, it's unlikely there are any copies left. All the same, contact Toby. There may perhaps be something available to you in the next months.

The Verdict: A fresh talent who'll hopefully be around for some time to come. (AL)

Forlorn Funnies #1
Absence of Ink
By Paul Hornschemeier

This is a very beautiful book. It sits just right in the hand, and the cover is matt-coated so that it feels nice too. You will flick through this after you've finished reading it just for the simple tactile pleasure it affords you.

A plot summary wouldn't do either of us any good. There are ostensibly a dozen stories here, but they all bleed one into the other, some taking part within other stories, some without. Each story is generally self-contained, although they tend to be vignettes rather than complete tales. It's a grand, mad experiment in storytelling, and it works with an extraordinary beauty.

The art is – ha, ha – even more difficult to pin down. This looks like an anthology worked on by every independent cartoonist you've ever heard of. All of Hornschemeier's pages are patiently thought out, with each change of art style matching the tone and intent of the story itself. The colouring is a glorious selection of complementary tones that shift between each segment, adding not only to each story, but placing delineation between them.

Even the lettering is clever.

The Verdict: Esoteric and egocentric. Forlorn and funny. But absolutely unlike anything else, and an invaluable purchase. (AC)

The Girly Comic
By various
£2.00 from Selina Lock, c/o 55 Ankle Hill, Melton Mowbray, Leics. LE13 0QJ, UK

Inside an enigmatic cover by Simon Fraser lies a set of short pieces selected by editor Selina Lock on the basis of what she believes women might like to read in a comic – hence the anthology's title. And before any cynics out there begin sniggering knowingly, no, that doesn't mean it's a feminist manifesto of some kind, or a revival of the once popular romance comics. That was the 70s - this is now, and if Lock has taken any cues from the past they'd seem to be from the hugely eclectic range of matter and down to earth style of the British weekly comics for girls, where action/adventure stories and SF could be found side by side with tales of school life, socialisation and humorous cartooning.

Add a twist of sharp spice to that recipe, and what you get is, for

instance, Paul Ferry and Peet! Clack's hardboiled, quite violent *Furlough* alongside Terry Wiley's hilarious account of schoolgirls lighting up in a secluded corner of the playground and discussing their preferences in booze... Meanwhile, Lee Kennedy happily recalls childhood dreams of wanting to be Athena after reading the Classics Illustrated version of The Iliad, while Arthur Goodman admits that girls can quite enjoy RPGs so long as they're not run by sexually frustrated Dungeon Masters... You get the idea. "Slice of life" material predominates, but there's plenty of action, fantasy and crazy humour here too.

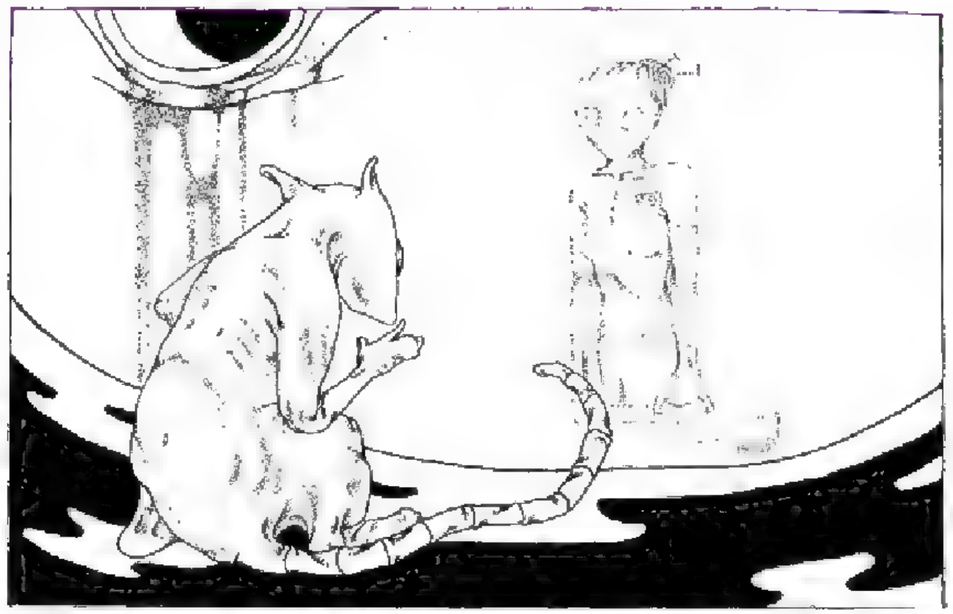
Almost unnoticed on the back cover is perhaps my favourite strip; a brief, beautifully drawn and coloured snapshot of one of those hideously embarrassing schoolyard games of teenage initiation and exploration, capturing the essence of the moment perfectly. It's scripted by Lock herself; perhaps in future issues she should be doing more than simply corralling contributors and putting together what is a rather attractively produced and enjoyable package.

The Verdict: It's a highly entertaining read for all. (MK)

Klempner #214

$4, or comics in trade, from Zoe/ H.P., Suite 101, 76 North Nanaimo Street, Vancouver, B.C., Canada V5L 3G2.

On first viewing, this appears to be a tract on the morality of laboratory experiments and mutilation of animals, also the whole area of selective breeding. However, much of the story focuses on the central character (a female plumber), a



giant rat, and interspecies mating. A lot of the enjoyment of this comic lies in watching those metaphors, symbols and messages run up and down the streets, rapping on doors at 7am.

Utilising a wide-screen format, author "Harold Penis" releases his rather quirky, slacker style onto the pages: a most competent minimalism. Penis is Canadian and the 200 or so words in the comic are in German. The visual language does most of the explaining.

Also available with this is Good Morning, Mr. Ramsbottom. In English, it's a one picture per (24) page A7 pocketbook about two dignified gents accosted by the town boob, who attempts to embarrass and humiliate them. A fun four minuter written by Ryan Matthews and illustrated by Harold Penis.

The Verdict: A welcoming read - take this trip. (AL)

Kouseki: First Insight #1

$1.60 from Jacqui More, Insomniac Machine, 5500 Laurent Drive 515D, Cleveland, OH 44129, USA

This is the first offering from Insomniac Machine, a group of creators based in the US, Mexico and Canada, Europe and Indonesia. The story centres on the samurai of Zeni Okoku and their conflict with the Shurajou Guntal and other external forces, supposedly from a far more sinister region. Ooh, ooh. Me so scared.

Writer Tim Edstrom does competent work on the first of this multi-volume piece; however the gallery glory really belongs to artists Jacqui More and Victor Aviles. Using black, white, red and CGImitating grey watered brush and perhaps some motion blurring, the effect is, particularly at first, nothing short of brilliant. The recreated, distinctly Japanese, architecture and costumes explode into the eyes some very worked detailing.

My complaint? This is too good to be confined to a format that suffocates the artist. Kouseki could do with more investment in page layout, a tinkering with the current thin-line panel borders. The quality paper suits, is not misused, and is deserved. I don't know my samurai comics, but I hope these folks stick with their schedule.

The Verdict: Very, very promising, could be on the verge of ascension. (AL)

Lady Mountain

£1.50 from Malcy Duff, 24 Belmont Gardens, Edinburgh, EH12 6JH, Scotland

From what I understand this is a comic about environmental issues and the effect they have on day-to-day physiognomy (now *them's* issues). Using the metaphor of the countryside and maternal visage, Malcy tells his tale with shapes ugly and beautiful. I've read this four or five times now and I'm not sure I get it - the compulsion to return is annoying but I believe worthwhile. In the meantime I'll just keep on climbing Lady Mountain.

The book is A6 size in the 'missive device' (comic-as-postcard) format; a reasonable choice for a gift.

The Verdict: Created by a man whose understanding of comics as a form is broad and second to none. (AL)

The Lupus #3

£1.20 from Ben Oakes, 65 South Grove, Sale, Manchester, M33 3AR, UK

The creation of 15 Nuns man Ben Oakes, The Lupus easily surpasses its predecessor with its overwhelmingly attractive attitude and neato design. Topics such as stalking and drug addiction are treated with the sugary heap of fashion and the honey's glaze of credibility.

Oakes' style is adequate, using a bold combination of slim mark outlines and thick black areas, plus a purposefully haphazard and uneven figure placement. The colours on the cover happily recall that American-manga sensibility thing that Jamie Hewlett does well. This comic is so hip and has plenty of zinesque moxie to endear.

Also re-appearing from 15 Nuns is artist John Cake, and the return of his Big Night Out-style comedy, *The Bruising Pit*. Ken (the washing machine), Bobby and Walter fear their pub may be demolished and, in an effort to prevent that, board a bus driven by Busta Rhymes. This surrealist strip is unique, essential and worth the price of admission alone.

The Verdict: Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense. Nonsense, nonsense, nonsense, nonsense. (AL)

Marc Hempel's Naked Brain #1

Insight Studios

By Marc Hempel

This one is easy. Look at the back cover gag. If it makes you laugh, take the comic to the counter and pay for it. Take it home, read it all and enjoy it. Write to Borderline and say thank you.

What do you mean, there aren't any copies of Naked Brain in your local comic shop? Well, in that case, you're going to have to ask them to order you one. If you're lucky, that will possibly be within their capabilities. You're just going to have to trust them. And trust me, too. When have I ever steered you wrong? That's right.

The Verdict: Buy this. Order it blind if you have to. Stop snivelling, just go and do it. (AC)

NW2

£1.00 for 12 A5 pages – contact anna@dilse.freeserve.co.uk for

more details

Rob and Julia live in a bedsit in North West London. She's a ditzy middle class wannabe actress, he's a pony-tailed cynic with a nice line in left-wing rhetoric. This slim collection features 14 one-page and half-page strips, each one neatly detailing the minutiae of their occasionally fraught relationship and myriad incompatibilities.

A gentle commentary on the stresses and strains of modern urban relationships, NW2 doesn't try too hard for laughs, instead contenting itself with the odd wry observation about characters and situations that are instantly recognisable. Highlights include Julia's attempts at cooking a saffron and cream cheese sauce on a Baby Belling and Rob's "Modern Life Is Rubbish" rant at Hyde Park Corner.

Anna's art probably won't win her any awards and she could probably do with a crash course in how to draw cats, but her simple style and eye for detail just about plaster over the numerous shortcomings in her figure-work.

The Verdict: The kind of accessible, gently humorous strip that wouldn't look out of place in *The Guardian*'s Saturday magazine. (AW)

Paper Museum #1
Jungle Boy Press
By various

Boasting cover art contributions from such luminaries as Allred, Mignola, Nowlan and Purcell, this is nevertheless an anthology resting squarely on the talents of less well known creators.

There is a lot to appreciate here. Jai Nitz's writing on two of the offerings does suffer from a paucity of imagination - simply re-treading the tales of Tarzan and Rapunzel - but he manages to tell complete tales within his allotted eight pages, a talent uncommon amongst modern comic writers, as current readers of Daredevil can attest. His artists serve him well; Lafe Smith and Mick Gray render Phil Hester's layouts into a finely told example of controlled storytelling, and Tom Fowler provides apt art for a fantasy story along the lines of Charles Vess and Zander Cannon.

The standout contributions here, though, are the two stories written and drawn by Nick Derrington. Both hark back to the days of *Flash Gordon* and *King Of The Rocket Men*, but through a wonderfully cynical modern filter that refuses to let nostalgia stand in the way of death and heartbreak. The final panel of *The Shark: The Silver Skull's Revenge* still gives me fits of laughter every time I look at it, and I've looked at it a lot.

The Verdict: This offers 32 pages in an album-sized format for only $2.95; as such, it provides excellent value for someone looking for something a little different – and is worth checking out for Derrington's "Mike Allred with a mean streak" efforts alone. (AC)

Pest Control #1
By Grant Springford, 2 Cawston Court, Highland Road, Bromley, BR1 4AF, details from grantspringford@yahoo.co.uk

Martin Eden's The O Men has been praised for the way Eden has captured a style of characterisation similar to that of Grant Morrison. Grant Springford's superhero title has a go at emulating another of Morrison's strengths: utter disturbing weirdness. On the whole, it is a successful attempt, with the intriguing Imaginary Bishops and psychic superhero The Link providing good examples of a decidedly Morrison-esque strength of imagination. The story is well written, with a good sense of pacing and a nice sense of mystery and discomfort, despite the familiar superhero trappings. The art is suitably strange looking, and there are some excellent character designs.

However, Springford needs to give more attention to his figure work, as some of his characters have a somewhat bloated and lumpy look to them. Some more detail in the art would also not go amiss, as many of the pages seem blank and empty. All that said, this is a very promising start, and is well worth a look.

The Verdict: A little derivative perhaps, and in need of some work, but full of great ideas and quite well written. (KG)

(Pink Square)
£1.50 from Malcy Duff, 24 Belmont Gardens, Edinburgh, EH12 6JH, Scotland

(Pink Square) because there are 106 different titles for this book. Not a dream, not a hoax, not an imaginary story! It's got personification, incoherencies and distraction, integrity, lack of integration, prejudice, spotlight on demand, measurement (of movement), and comparison between people and things.

It's worth picking this book up, draw your own conclusions from it. As far as I can ascertain, it's a story of loneliness based around a selection of very nervous characters. The book has an air of quashed dreams and a real sense of helplessness. It's definitely a great comic if only to have as a conversation piece. The artwork as always is tidy and at some points conveys a real sense of isolation.

The Verdict: Frustrating, compelling, Duff is one of the most exciting cartoonists in Britain today. (AL)

Sgt. Mike Battle
£3.00 from Graham Pearce, 10 Kingsmead Court, Yarmouth Gardens, Shirley, Southampton, SO15 5SF, UK

Lots of un-politically correct stereotypes are milked in this Captain America/Sgt. Rock parody. There are a few laughs and moments of conceit, taking the piss out of American self-perspective and its plentiful absurdities through the decades. One of this booklet's failings, though, is the artwork, which doesn't really relate to any style of the times that the writing presumably seeks to emulate.

The clincher for me, though, is that free with every copy of Sgt. Mike Battle comes Watchblood. Graham Pearce admits he did this a few years ago, thus countering the argument of its relevancy. It's more than competent at dealing with vindicating the pile of shite comics Pearcey must have read in the '90s, though - the techniques of his subject matter have certainly been analysed. Through the character of best-selling cartoonist Rob Leningrad, Pearce's aim is simply egotist destruction. And through clever placing of irrelevancies he manages this. Not everybody's cup of tea, but it certainly made me laugh, quite a lot.

The Verdict: Dodgy at best, but freebie Watchblood is just ideal for that odd compulsion to read comics after a night at the pub. (AL)

Shiver in the Dark #1
Singing Ink
By Stuart Sayger

This is such a slim volume (16 pages including the covers) for its asking price of $2.50 that you'd have to seriously consider what you get for your money. Luckily, that's what we're here for.

The main character is Grace, a rich Daddy's girl who steals a book from a mysterious old bookstore and, panged by conscience and nightmares, attempts to return the book - but before she can do so, the shop burns down. That may not sound a lot, but it's plenty for 16 pages, and those pages are filled with deft characterisation and elements of back-story that lift this well above the average. It's very reminiscent of the tales DC's Houses Of Mystery and Secrets did so well back in the '70s, placing an attractive contemporary into an old-fashioned horror scenario in order to teach them a moral lesson. Such an homage would explain what, at first, seem to be naiveties in the script and characterisation, making them well-observed nods to an age gone by, particularly the narrative in the style of Rod Serling and The Cryptkeeper.

Also retrospective is Sayger's art, although it takes its inspiration from a kaleidoscope of sources. The inking is redolent of such artists as Neal Adams and Bill Sienkiewicz, with a healthy infusion of Ashley Wood; the pencilling practically screams the names of Marc Hempel and Kyle Baker at you from the page. This is not to denigrate the art - if anything, Sayger's work is made original by its astonishing array of influences. I can think of few artists who could successfully meld such a disparate group of artists into something coherent, much less readable and enjoyable for its own sake.

Don't be put off by the page count; there's as much story here as in comics twice the length, and the art is truly something to see.
The Verdict: A contemporary yet nostalgic horror story, illustrated with explosive confidence by a creator who has crafted something new from old threads. (AC)

Signifying Nothing
By Robert Ullman
76 B&W pages, $5, available from www.lurid.com

In Signifying Nothing, collecting the first four issues of his mini comic From the Curve, Robert Ullman is mining the same seam as early Adrian Tomine with a collection of moody autobiographical pieces about aimless college kids and the roads they're not travelling.

The majority of strips in this collection are only four panels long and as they cover the time period from 1994 - 1998, you can see his work maturing before your eyes. The later strips still have the references to hip bands but they seem less forced, and his artwork towards the end is taking on a pleasingly exaggerated and bold style.

Nothing in here is particularly groundbreaking but his observations can be spot on, his slacker angst seems painfully resonant, and there are enough moments in the likes of *Walking* and *Soda Can* to suggest that he's a talent worth watching.
The Verdict: B&W slice of life slacker observations; sad, funny, well worth investing time and money in. (SM)

Stonebroke 3
By Phil Walsh, Tom Lennon and Rob Walsh
£2.30 from Tom Lennon, 74 Gibbons Road, Four Oaks, Sutton Coldfield, West Midlands B75 5HB, UK

Tom Lennon's vision of a future city where the streets are overrun with violence, the police are for the most part hopelessly corrupt and only the strong stand much chance of survival is hardly, on the face of it, anything new - in fact, such dystopian visions became a science fiction staple long ago. But it isn't the formula itself that counts, it's how it's handled; and Lennon's treatment of it, centred around the satisfyingly quirky notion of a company of vigilante bus drivers (!), is offbeat enough to maintain interest and, frequently, to raise a smile too. How often do you see the big, threatening villain of the episode spending most of it attempting to detach a small robot dog from his groin?

Without that kind of diverting approach, most of this issue's lead story would be not much more than a competently constructed, prolonged fight scene and aftermath. But the black humour does lift it - and so, almost to my surprise, does Rob Walsh's stiff, resolutely non-realistic and almost compulsively cross-hatched artwork. I'm really not sure that I like the look of it, but it certainly has a remarkable intensity about it which deepens the resonances of Phil Walsh's plot and dialogue.

I did like the backup strip more. Lennon wrote this brief parody of *Star Trek* (all versions mixed and matched) himself, and the man's ear for language and worryingly precise grasp of jargonese result in a script which wrenched several belly laughs from me in the course of just four pages. Given the frequency with which *Star Trek* has been parodied, that's no mean achievement!
The Verdict: Black humour, intense art and a fine grasp of language make compulsive reading out of a couple of well-worn formulae. (MK)

Top Notch Tosh #6
£1.50 from Andrew Lewis, 39 Priory Court, Brynoch, Neath, West Glamorgan, SA10 7RZ, Wales

National Comics Award winner Andrew Lewis hammers out some witty dialogue and some fly plot twirls in this three-piece united by a theme of love. *Roboman* is illustrated by Matt Brown, whose tone can be too timid at times but is rewarding where there is an unrestrained use of black. However, this is classic Lewis, embodying the finer qualities of any *Future Shock*, racy, and with some great light chuckles and use of irony.

Your Yin To My Yang is an experimental piece of non-pictorial word placement, successful due to Lewis' ability to create compelling tales for varying levels of immersion. The package concludes with a most offbeat adaptation of John Keats' La Belle Dame Sans Merci, new dimensions available to warp into perhaps not a neo-classic, but something that stays in the memory for quite some time after.
The Verdict: Buy yourself a ticket into the unique world of Andrew Lewis, the new thrill master! (AL)

XXX Live Nude Girls #1
Penny Dreadful Press
By Laurenn McCubbin and Nikki Hoffman

According to the back cover blurb, XXX Live Nude Girls "isn't what you think". What it is, though, is a collection of anecdotes, snapshots almost like poetry in their brevity, which tell stories of Booze, Drugs, Sex and Rage; these short tales are accompanied by two or three panels per page of superb, grey-toned art.

This isn't what might be called a comic in the strictest sense; it is more an illustrated prose project, but one which relies on the artwork - more often than not in counterpoint to the writing - to get across the full impact of the story. The writing is spare and lean, taking the tenets of haiku and poetry and using them cleverly and effectively in a prose form, in about one hundred words or less. The art is thick-lined and realistic, utilising many shades of grey to form dense and believable images, almost like black and white photography in effect.
The Verdict: A brave and largely successful attempt by two women to make a thoughtful, provocative and quality comic that abandons many tropes of the medium and forges something a little bit different. (AC)

YOUNG GUNS

It's not age but talent that determines tomorrow's stars today... this issue: Steve Griffin

I LIVE and work in Perth, Australia. Perth is on the other side of the country from any place you've probably heard of. Despite there being almost no comics scene here, the city has managed to produce successful comic artists Ashley Wood and Ben Templesmith. And like them, I take on as many artistic chores as I can, pencilling, inking, colouring and lettering my own pages. However, I am looking forward to someday living the comicbook dream of getting an underpaid lackey to blame my mistakes on. And barring that, a lice-free monkey to make me coffee and take my calls.

I've always wanted to do comic books. I've always wanted to draw. I started by doing the obligatory submit-samples-till-your-fingers-bleed thing, but eventually, not happy with getting rejections from just comicbook companies, my focus shifted to an even more difficult and ridiculous industry, comic strips. My strips were generally deemed "not mainstream enough" by the syndicates (read: lacking families or talking cats). So I went online. I soon discovered that online comic strips followed the same tired old restrictions that came with newspapers, ignoring the advantages of their electronic form. Frustrated by this lack of initiative, I created Big Head's Amazing Comic Strip Adventure Game, which is, you guessed it, a comic strip adventure game. It's interactive and a bit of fun and people seem to enjoy it. The game can be found at *www.monkeyfun.com*.

Following that, I started getting into Flash animation and web design (for work and play). I believe in looking for fresh approaches in whatever medium you're working in, which has led to varied, sometimes weird, and usually nonconformist work. I'm currently working on a deal with an online entertainment company to showcase a two part (so far) cartoon series called *Empty Sockets*.

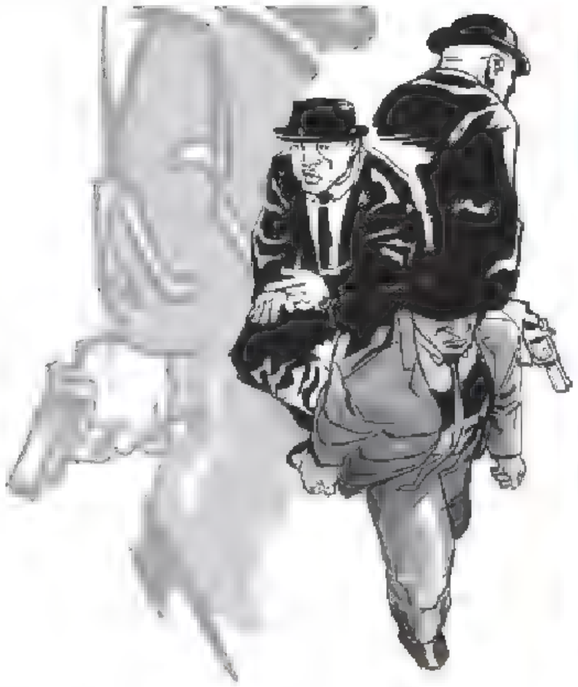
My big project at the moment though, and my official

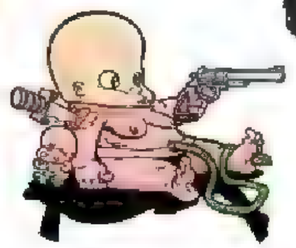
GIRL. PLANT.

ALL RIGHT, ALL RIGHT....
THERE'S A PACKAGE IN THE TRUNK. NEEDS TO BE DELIVERED TO A CERTAIN PARTY BY THIS TIME TOMORROW. THAT'S ALL.
AND THERE ARE CERTAIN REASONS THE COPS CAN'T BE CALLED IN.

debut on the comic scene, is a book I am working on with writer and creator B. Clay Moore, called Hawaiian Dick. I'll let you interpret the title yourself... but the story involves a big, bald Hawaiian/ Samoan detective. His name's Mo, and he most closely resembles a living Tiki statue in a blue suit. The book's title character is Mo's friend Byrd, a big city cop who, in 1953, has left trouble behind to find seclusion in Hawaii as a private dick. So it's a bit of a twist when, amongst the beaches, tiki bars and gently lapping ocean waves he crosses paths with maniacal drug lords, wandering zombies, marching ghosts and a host of Hawaiian folklore inhabitants.

It's exciting to be working on a book that breaks fresh ground in the realm of comics, something that is sorely lacking in today's marketplace. And it's the kind of book I'd like to buy even if I wasn't involved, which is probably a good thing. We're currently firming things up with a major publisher, and then the fun begins!





DRAWING BOARD

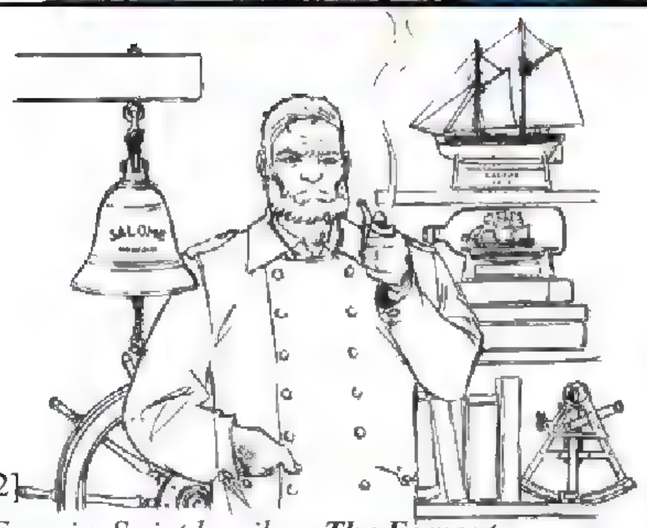
ROBERT ADLER

BORN in 1978, he is one of Poland's youngest and most talented illustrators. According to his own statement, Robert Adler learned to read as a child from reading comics. His favourite "teacher" was **Funky Koval**, a political fiction comic by Boguslaw Polch. Critics and fans often compare his work to the style of this cult classic. Adler is well known for his realistic manner of drawing and his good sense of narrative tempo. He has had two books published, and a large number of publications in different magazines, which is quite unusual for a Polish author.

Adler's early work - published in the SF magazine *Nowa Fantastyka* - consisted of one page black and white stories based on his own scripts. Later he started to work with a computer games magazine called *Reset*, where his skills as a professional illustrator developed. In the pages of this magazine his first serious comics work, **Golota vs. Predator**, based on a script by Tobiasz Piatkowski, saw the light of day. This colourful piece of art - a witty and intellectual play on pop cultural icons - received much praise and secured Adler and Piatkowski a place in the Polish comics pantheon. *Reset* then presented the long running **48 stron** ("48 pages"), which later became Adler and Piatkowski's first album. It tells the story of two crazy cops called Gorsky and Butch who are on a mission to find out the reason for the comic they are appearing in. The plot is full of pop cultural references to superstars and films like *Star Wars, Aliens, Matrix* and *Scream*. This absurd, funny story actually increased the selling rates of *Reset*.

Adler works as a storyboard artist in advertising and as a book illustrator, because it is hard to make a living solely from comics in Poland. His artwork, often showing beautiful women, has been used on the posters of many comics festivals. In fact, drawing women is a niche in which Adler

MAIN GATE
BUSZAĆ! VELASQUEZ I DRINK NA SZPICY! HIPS, CROW, FREEZE - LEWA FLANKA! LEWA MÓWIĘ!
WITAMY W WYLUDNIONEJ KOLONII KOSMICZNEJ OWINIĘTEJ MGŁĄ TAJEMNICY I SKRYWAJĄCEJ MROCZNY SEKRET



has become a true maestro. And we all know that this is significant for a good comics artist.

Robert Adler's main advantage is his great fascination with the art of comics. He is able to work swiftly with the language of this medium, giving his graphic novels a perfect flow of narration. His characteristic quasi-realistic linework is well suited to the type of stories he likes to tell; stories of crime and gangsters set in a dark and gloomy world of cyberpunk. The stories he creates together with Piatkowski, his good friend and co-writer, are full of hard men, beautiful women, big guns and fantastic vehicles.

Adler's favorite film is *Blade Runner* and as a kid he loved to read the fantasy stories of Jules Verne and Stanislaw Lem. His talent and great storytelling fluency may make comics his first profession one day.

Individual albums:
48 stron - script by Adler and Piatkowski [Mandragora 2001]
Breakoff - script by Adler and Piatkowski [Egmont 2002]

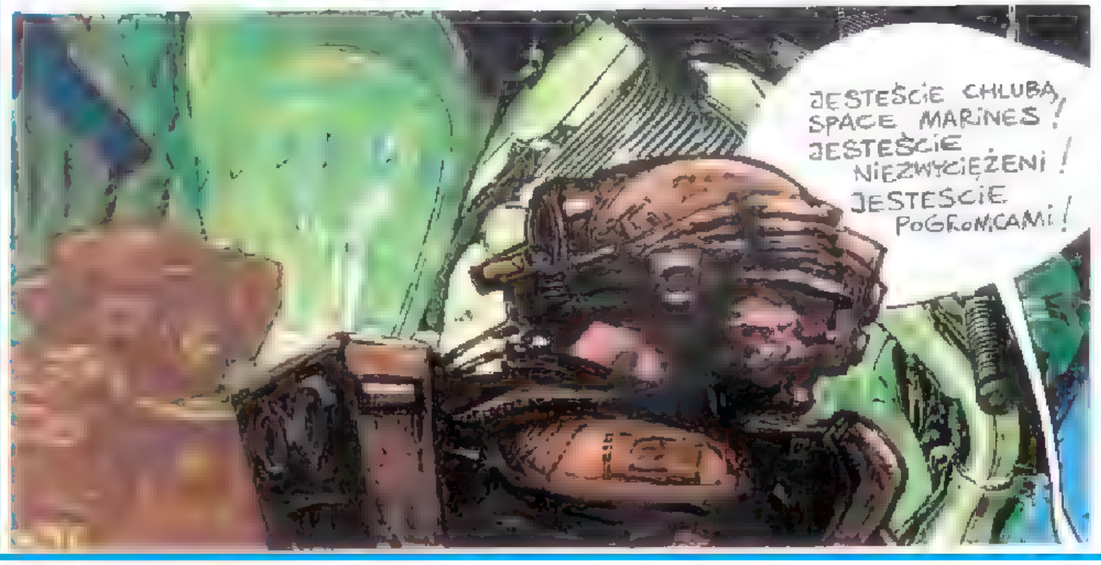
Other publications: in *Reset, Nowa Fantastyka, KRON, Esensja, Swiat komiksu,* ***The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists***.
Contact: [+48 606] 184456, email: *deadlinetp@wp.pl*

This biographical note was written by Artur Długosz, editor-in-chief of Esensja *(www.Esensja.pl) and editor of* Swiat Komiksu, *and translated into English by Dennis Wojda.*

DRAWING BOARD II

PRZEMYSLAW "TRUST" TRUSCINSKI

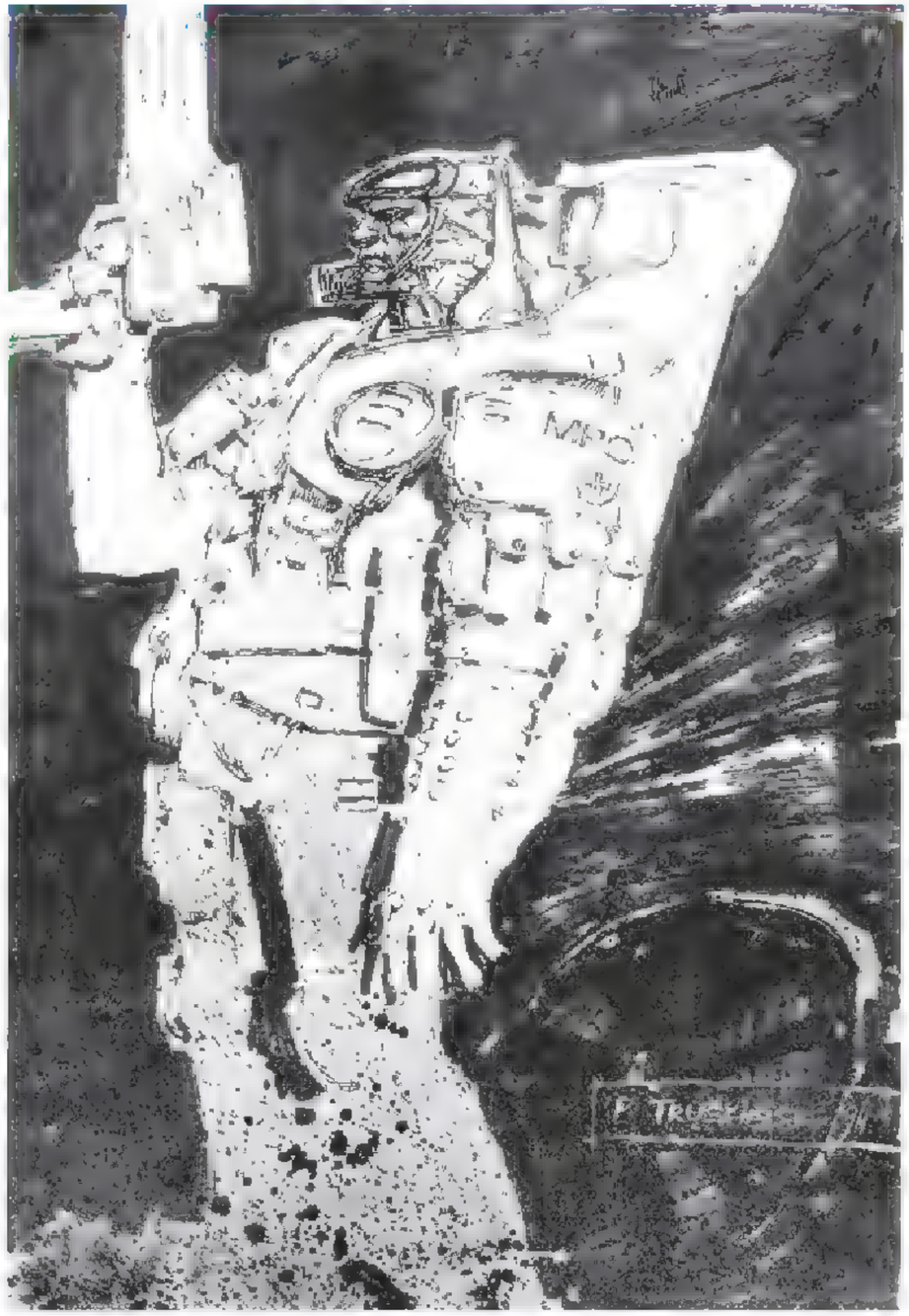
PRZEMYSLAW Truscinski is one of the driving forces of Poland's comics scene. He has been involved in organizing the International Comic Festival in Lodz since 1991. In 2002 he organized "D'Arcy Komiks", one of the country's biggest exhibitions of modern Polish comics. He is also a member of CONTUR [The Comics Creators Organization].



Truscinski studied graphic design and painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Lodz and comics is only one branch of the arts to occupy his interests. He is also active as a painter, book and advertising illustrator, storyboard artist etc. He has participated in numerous art and comics exhibitions - individual and collective - in Poland (in Lodz, Krakow and Warsaw) and abroad (in Paris, Berijeka, Frankfurt and Angoulême). As a comics creator he belongs to the so called "New Wave" of young authors who made their debuts in the 1990s. He is one of the few members of the "New Wave" not to have had his own book published yet.

In 1994 he won the Grand Prix at the comic festival in Lodz, where he was born and raised. He now lives and works in Warsaw. Since 1997 his main occupation has been as a storyboard artist for advertising agencies such as D'Arcy, Young & Rubicam, Saatchi & Saatchi, BBDO, Leo Burnet, McCann-Ericsson and Bates, to name a few. He is known for introducing the aesthetics and symbols of comics into advertising.

Truscinski's early work was influenced by SF films and literature. His realistic linework showed great expressiveness and a scrupulous regard for detail (especially when designing spaceships, vehicles and military uniforms). That early work was published in the pages of the *Czas Komiksu* magazine, where his individual style stood out as a landmark in Polish comics. His comics were so popular that many young artists tried to imitate his unique style.



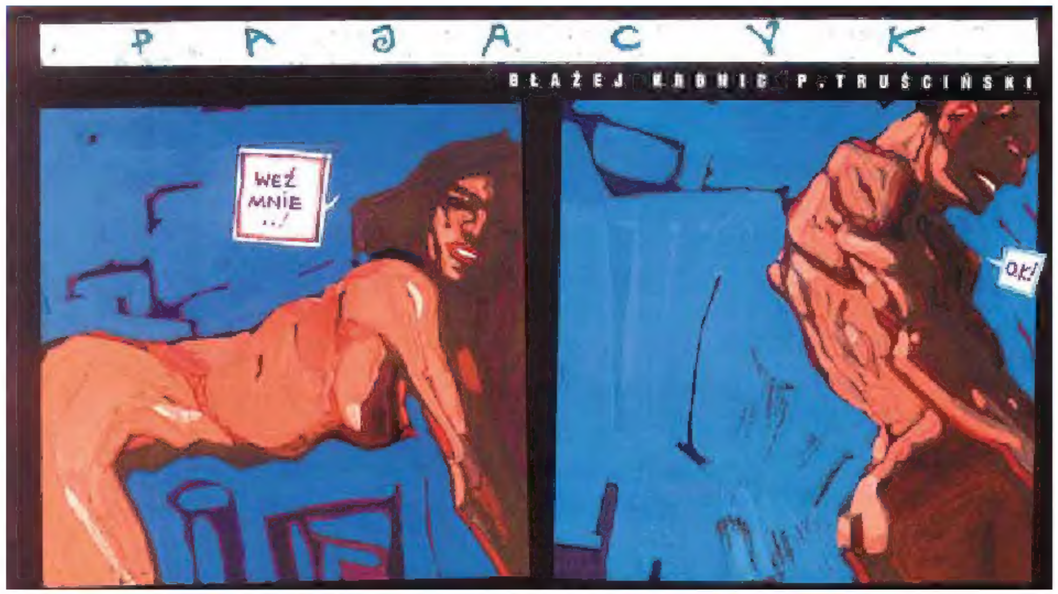
His later work may be described as short, humorous comic novels, always on the border of realism, fantasy and the grotesque. He is a true artist, always searching, always experimenting with new techniques and styles. He has come a long way as an illustrator, from being a detail-obsessed realist to becoming a futuristic expressionist with a playful eye for graphic

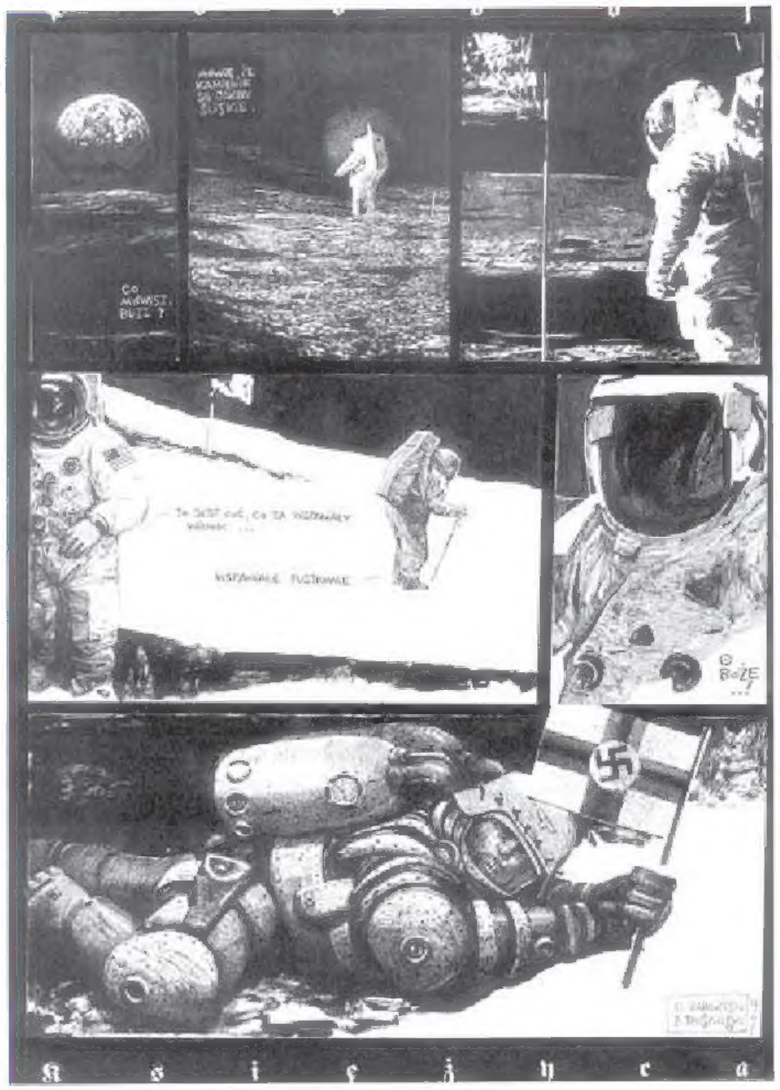
experiment.

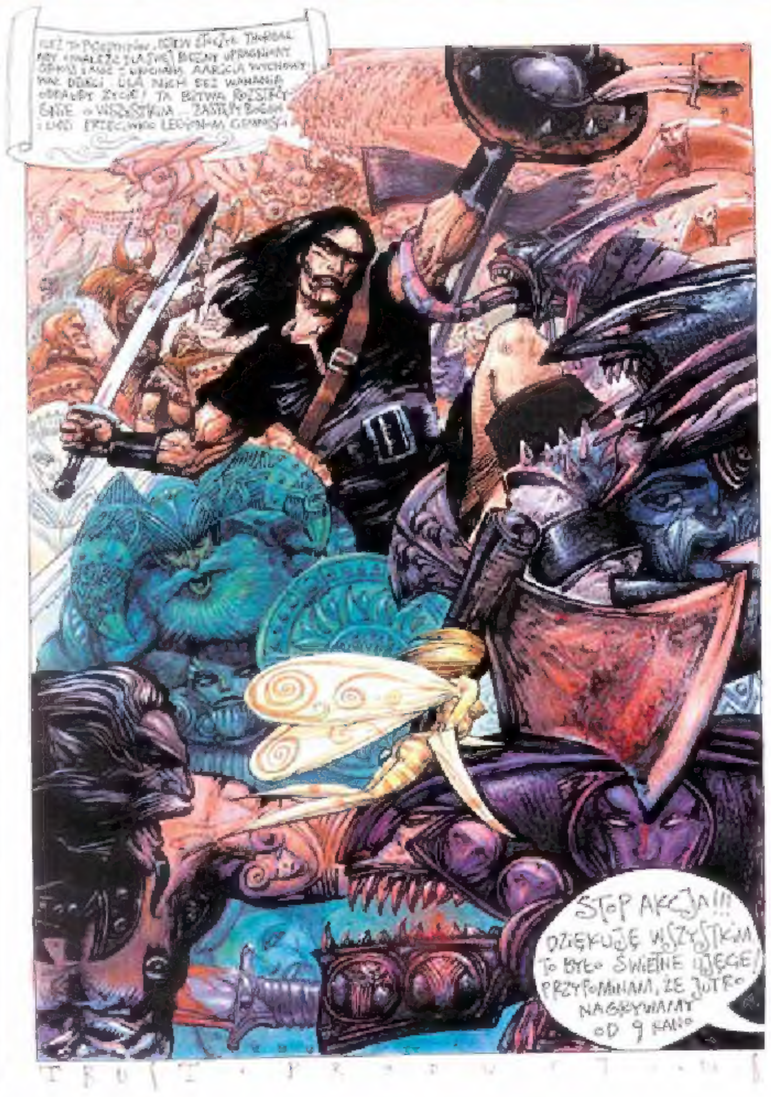
At the moment he is working on his first solo book, Dust – about a metaphysical superhero fighting drug crime.

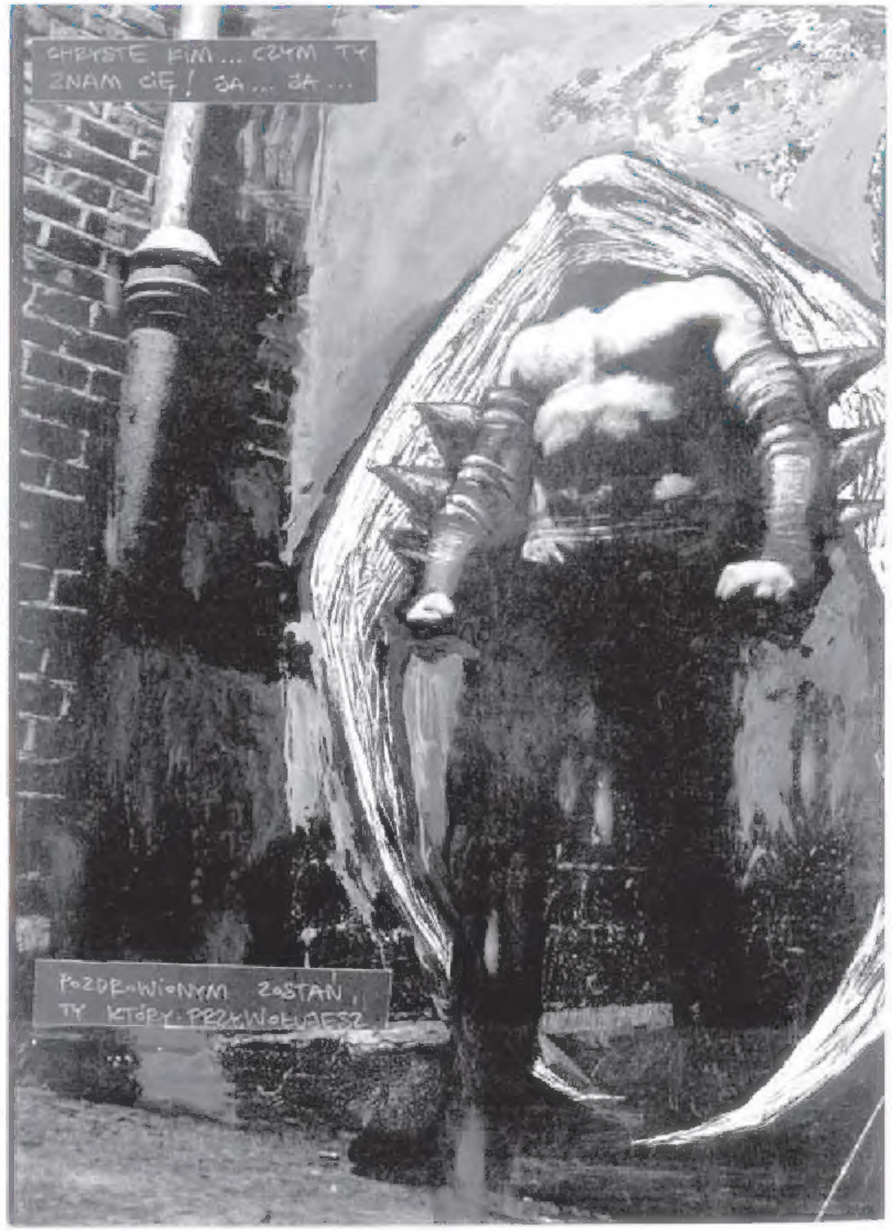
Truscinski's work has been published in *Machina, Gazeta Wyborcza, AQQ, Czas Komiksu, Fenix, Komiks Forum, Laif, KRON, Nowy Talisman, Nowa Fantastyka, Mlyn,* The Egmont Anthology of Polish Comics Artists.

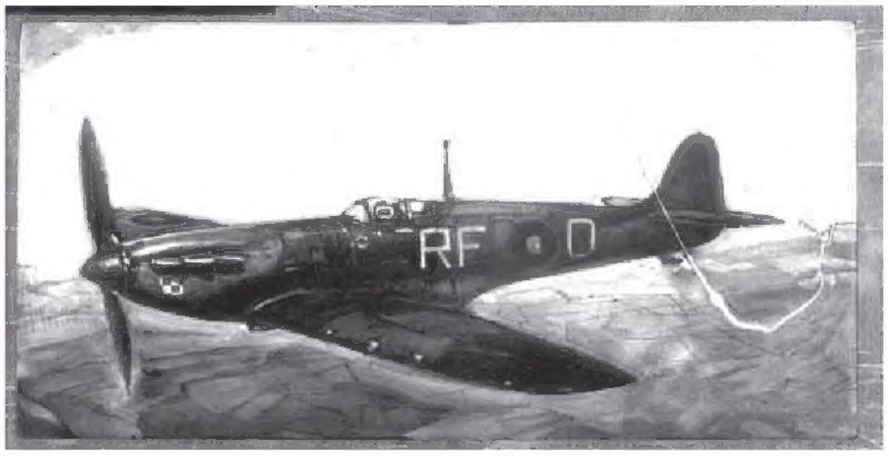
Contact: [+48 606] 251231, email: *truscinski@wp.pl*, mail: 6 Sierpnia 36 m15A, 90-617 Lodz, Poland







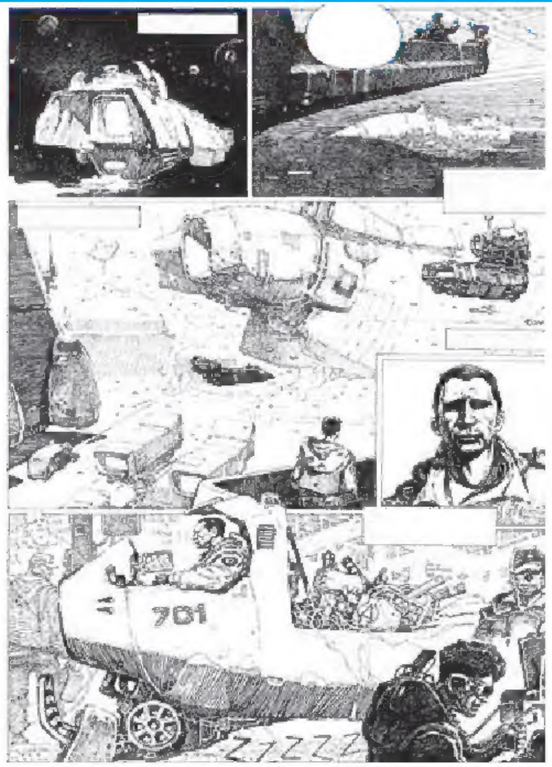




AN INTERVIEW WITH PRZEMYSLAW TRUSCINSKI

Dennis Wojda: Why comics?
Przemyslaw Truscinski: I've been interested in the idea of connecting text and image ever since I was a small kid. The more I draw, the more possibilities of artistic expression I discover. I'm constantly searching for new forms and contents. I have many plans for the future when it comes to art and comics.

DW: You always tend to experiment in your artwork. Was comics just another medium of expression for you as an artist?
PT: Actually, it was the other way around. I became involved with art through comics. That was why I wanted to study painting and graphic design at the Art Academy. Nowadays I find my influences and inspirations in art and art history - but also in music videos, films, people etc. I've made up the term "aggressive surrealism" to describe the style of my comics...



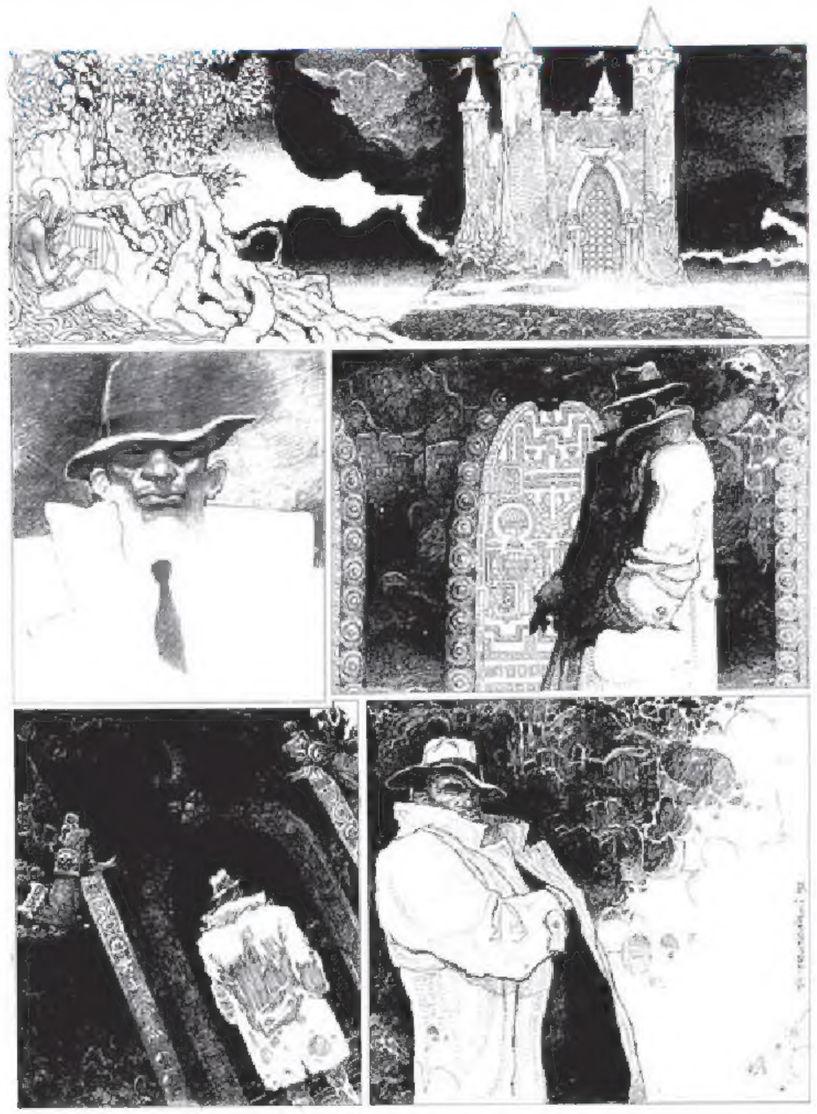
DW: By looking at your work one gets the feeling that you're inspired by the Surrealists.
PT: Well, actually I'm not that interested in surrealism. My work doesn't have anything to do with dreams. The only thing I have in common with surrealism is a sense of penetrating my sub-consciousness when I'm drawing. It's like searching for answers to my questions, answers I will probably never find. I suppose that's why my art is about asking questions...

DW: So why the term "aggressive surrealism"?
PT: I use that term to help my critics. Surrealism is commonly associated with the imaginary world. I suppose my work is closer to expressionism, symbolism and art deco. I like to play on the basis of those art styles when I create my comics. It helps me to achieve new values in my work.

DW: Do you consider yourself to be an artist or a storyteller?
PT: I feel like a fucking artist! I don't like to be called a comics artist. But still, I love comics more than any other artform. It's a very innovative medium.

DW: Where do you find your inspiration in comics?
PT: I admire the work of Moebius, McKean, Sienkiewicz, Kent Williams and Mignola.

DW: What about Polish illustrators?
PT: Yeah! There's Boguslaw Polch (author of the classic Funky Kowal series), of course, and Grzegorz Rosinski (Thorgal and Yans).



DW: How would you describe the Polish comics scene? Does it differ from what you've seen in other countries?
PT: Poland's comics creators are very well prepared both technically and artistically. The most talented ones have studied at art schools. I would say that the form and content of their work is on a very high level. When we showed our stuff in France we were constantly hearing comments about our work being "different". I suppose the French are right on that point. But then, I'm of the opinion that there are actually lots of analogies to "western" comics in the works of the Poles. If you look closer, you'll find influences from the USA, Japan, England and France.

DW: How do you feel about being presented on the pages of Borderline?
PT: I'm shocked and amazed that a magazine from the UK is interested in my work! Maybe one day my work will find an audience over there? But I suppose they'll have a problem with pronouncing my name. To make it easier, just call me "Trust".

Biographical note by Witold Tkaczyk and Dennis Wojda.

WORLD OF HEROS

"I still see Frank Miller and Alan Moore eating small children," claims Marvel's Bill Jemas

Chris Spicer & the World of Heros investigative team continue to scour their imaginations for all kinds of bollocks...

ADVANCE PREVIEWS – BONZA!

Here are some of the big new releases announced that made us retch the least.

From Someone Press:
The Collected Essays Of Dave Sim
By Dave Sim
THIS special collects Sim's controversial space-filling essays into one volume. Includes the classic "Women Are Shit," the ever-popular "Organised Religion - Why I Am God" and the bewildering "I'm Right And Everyone Else In The World Is Wrong And Anyone Who Disagrees Is Probably a Nasty Woman." Printed in Widescreen Ego-Trope to capture the full magnificence of Sim's vision.

From CrossGen:
The Spread #16
By Ron Marzbar and Kevin Laudandobnoxious
As Rachachachanach threatens to bring his hordes sweeping down upon the peaceful kingdom of Tzuk-nkhegfrgvxpqkn, Lorna, standing freshly bathed and naked in the sunlight before a huge, full-length mirror, her eyes sweeping down over the reflection of her full, pert, heaving teenage bosom, tracing the line of her hips down to her long, slender legs, feeling the thrill of the slightly chill air on her bare flesh, realises that only she can save the day. Parental warning - features middle-aged comic creators writing about semi-naked jailbait fantasy heroines in storylines which, while seeming innocent at first, have slightly disturbing elements that at second reading leave a vaguely unpleasant taste in the mouth.

I think you should bend over that sink, drop your knickers and let me give you a damn good seeing to, or I'll twat you round the 'ead

From DC:
Pardner #1
By Garth Ennis and Steve Dillon
WHEN a drunken vampiric cowboy Vietnam veteran discovers God working as a cellar-boy in a small yet incredibly friendly Irish bar in New York, he finds himself thrown into a terrifying conspiracy perpetuated by the secret masters of the world, and embarks upon a quest to uncover it while inserting numerous instances of blatant product placement for Guinness, accompanied only by the ghost of his bitter ex-girlfriend and a hilarious young disabled boy whose only means of communication is to write on walls with his own excrement.

From Marvel:
New X-Men # 163
By Grant Morrison and A Frank Quitely stand-in.
WITH morale at the school at an all-time low, things get worse when Beast announces his chronic alcohol dependency. Jean catches an alien virus which covers her body in open sores which weep stinking green pus while Cyclops slowly pukes blood into a bucket in the corner. Meanwhile Wolverine, staggering from the secret Government baby-slaughtering factory clutching at his stomach in a vain effort to prevent his intestines unravelling at his feet like a gooey hosepipe, stumbles awkwardly on his shattered legs into an industrial extractor fan, emerging moments later, his forelimbs tattered and shredded, only to be beaten half to death by skinless children armed with crowbars decorated with crude polaroids of car crash victims before falling down a mineshaft. Part 2 of 16.

From Mirror Group Publishing:
The Collected Andy Capp Volume 7492
By Reg Smythe
MORE hilarious wife-beating antics from the grim North of Britain as a drunken Capp publicly humiliates his wife by flirting with every woman in the pub and, when she complains, takes her home for the sound thrashing she so richly deserves. Comics the way you demanded them, you drunken working-class halfwit!

From Titan Books:
100 Bullets: 60 Long Minutes
By Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso
COLLECTED edition of the Vertigo series, showing in lobotomisingly painstaking detail events that occur in just one hour. Originally published over twenty-four individual issues.

Batman: Apocageddon
By various
THE collected Apocageddon crossover, in which Gotham is ravaged by a series of biblical plagues which leave the rest of the country miraculously unscathed. Batman struggles to maintain order, aided only by a motley crew of unpopular characters too weak to sustain their own series, who never once question why his JLA team-mates, supposedly the most powerful superheroes in the world, don't seem to want to get involved. Warning - Azrael appears!!

"Look, I don't want to be interviewed, especially by you!" Sam Mendes

SAVAGE DRAGOON! ERIK LARSEN HAS LOST THE PLOT! - WOO

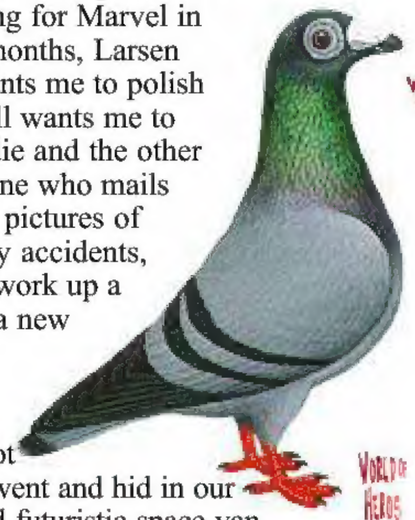
"I HAVE all the best ideas," said 74-year-old Erik Larsen, unveiling his latest creation just seconds before the start of the impending San Diego Comics Convention.

Savage Dragoon – the story of a medium-sized pigeon with a blunt, bullet-beak, said to be the direct ancestor of the present-day Racing Homer (no relation to the Springfield Fat Homer). Larsen claims the new series, expected to run 100 issues, will debut in the fall of 2003, shortly after he has finished his long run on **Savage Dragon**.

Between gigs, Larsen is doing some time working for bugger all at Vertigo on his other latest creation **Sauvage Dragqueen** - the story of a medium-sized homosexual with a penchant for dressing up in women's clothing with blunt, bullet-shaped breast-plates, said to be the direct ancestor of the present-day Danny LaRue.

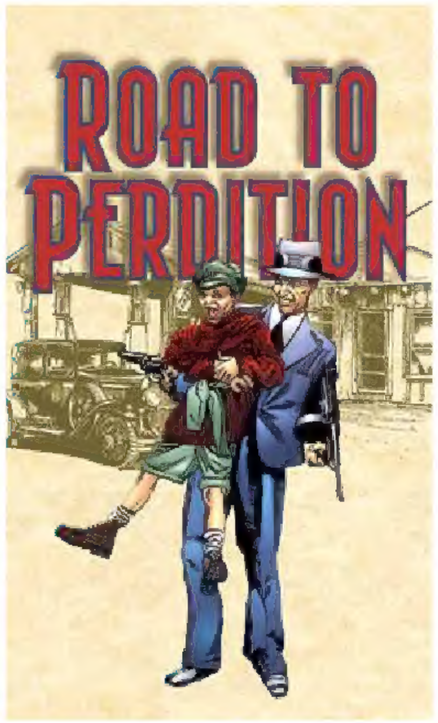
Larsen is also working on a crime thriller for Oni Press called **Sausage Dragnet** - the story of a medium-sized bratwurst with a blunt, bullet-shaped sausage appendage, said to be the direct ancestor of the present-day Cumberland.

When asked if he planned on doing anything for Marvel in the coming months, Larsen said, "Joe wants me to polish the doors. Bill wants me to eat shit and die and the other Bill, the fat one who mails me offensive pictures of pizza delivery accidents, wants me to work up a proposal for a new series called **Dragonet Savant**".



We then got worried and went and hid in our medium-sized futuristic space van.

WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN WIN

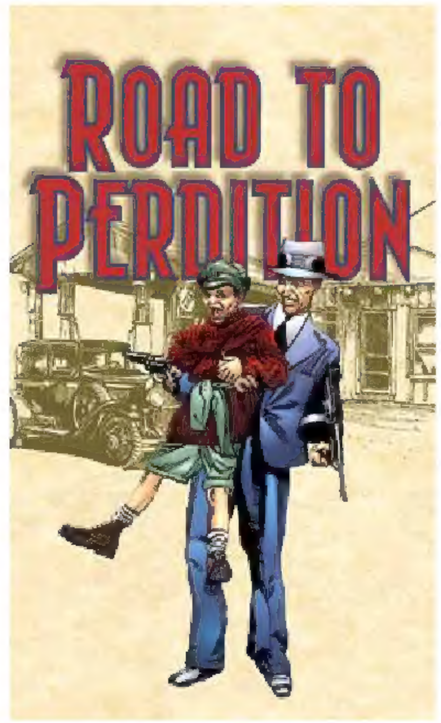


In association with Titan Books
Borderline is giving away 10 copies of
Road to Perdition by Max Allan Collins & Richard Piers Rayner

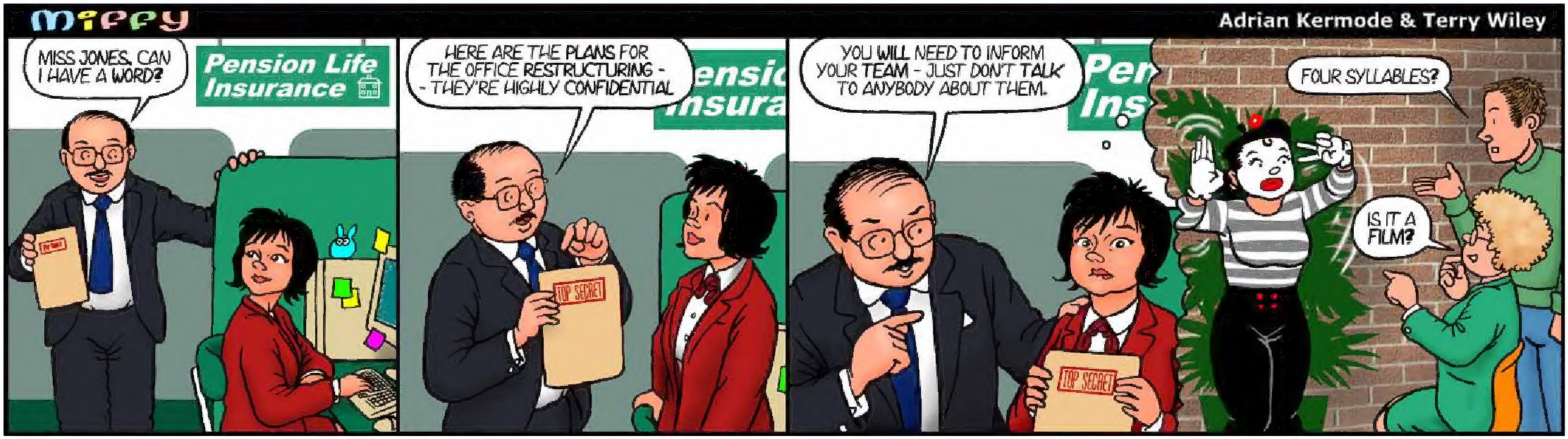
Sam Mendes has just adapted this superb graphic novel into a major feature film
starring Tom Hanks, Paul Newman and many more.
We've got a stack of them to give away... And all you've got to do is answer a simple question to win one!

Which DC imprint originally published Road to Perdition?

a) DC Universe
b) Vertigo Comics
c) Paradox Press
d) Mad Magazine
e) Helix
f) WildStorm Comics



Send your answers either by email to: editorial@borderline.mediahall.co.uk
or on a postcard to the editorial address before October 1st 2002. Include a mailing address in any of your replies.


Miffy
Adrian Kermode & Terry Wiley
MISS JONES, CAN I HAVE A WORD?
Pension Life Insurance
HERE ARE THE PLANS FOR THE OFFICE RESTRUCTURING - - THEY'RE HIGHLY CONFIDENTIAL
TOP SECRET
YOU WILL NEED TO INFORM YOUR TEAM - JUST DON'T TALK TO ANYBODY ABOUT THEM.
TOP SECRET
FOUR SYLLABLES?
IS IT A FILM?